SHADOW OF THE
MOON
BOX SET
MAC FLYNN

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Shadow of the Moon Box Set (Werewolf / Shifter Romance)

MAC FLYNN

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CHAPTER 1

I was a pretty average police detective until he claimed me as his own. Sometimes I'm not sure whether I should hate or love him for that. It doesn't matter now. It's done and I have to live with it.

My story starts on the night of my big change. I worked in a large city of a couple million. We had our usual skyscrapers in the financial district, the industrial with its black smoke, and the wrong side of the tracks with its gang violence. The whole place was ringed by suburbia for those who could afford the commute, and apartments in the older neighborhoods for those who couldn't. I couldn't, so my place was uptown in an old apartment building built before my grandparents were born.

At that moment I wished I was back in that dreary place. Instead I sat in my parked police car. At my side was a grande coffee, cold and lacking in taste, but not the precious caffeine I needed to keep myself awake.

"Maria, you read me?" a male voice called over my car's intercom.

I rolled my eyes and picked up the receiver. "That's Detective Marie Selena, Randy," I reminded him.

"And that's Officer Randy to you, but why are we being formal at this hour? Nobody's listening," he pointed out.

He was probably right. The hour was near midnight, and the night was a Tuesday. Nothing ever happened on Tuesdays, even in a big city like this one. The criminals almost had an unwritten rule that Tuesdays were the days to lay their feet back and enjoy their ill-gotten loot and plan their next law breaking scheme.

As a detective I should have had a cushioned desk job in the department where I worked a nine-to-five shift, but the precinct was short on cash at that time. Well, it was always short on cash. That meant I had to do double-duty as a street cop.

I rolled my eyes. "Because somebody might be, now what do you have for me?"

"Nothing much. Got a call in a minute ago about some suspicious behavior around one of the clubs in your area."

"Which one?"

"The Wolf's Den."

I snorted. "Sounds like something from a bad horror movie. Is it a strip club?"

"Nope, that's the funny thing. It's one of those hush-hush places where the place is always crowded but most of the people don't come in through the front door. The clientele's pretty rich, too, or so my sources tell me," he informed me.

"Did your source tell you how I can get into this place without alerting these suspicious guys?" I asked him.

"Nope. He knows a lot, but not even he can figure that out. As for the call, they were in the alley behind the place. Got dropped off by a black car that sped away."

"This the club owners reporting it?"

"Nope. A passerby on the street waiting in line to get inside noticed it and called us. Said he thought we ought to know."

I sighed and started the engine. "I guess I'll go check it out. You got that address?"

"Yep, 11 Lupine Street," he told me.

"Got it. Don't leave the lights on for me," I quipped.

He chuckled. "I won't. Good luck."

"Over and out."

I hung up the receiver and pulled out of the parking spot. Lupine street was two blocks down in the red-light district of the city. People went there for a smoke of something more than tobacco and stayed for the illegal commercial moonshine. Both sides of the long, colorful street were lined with ads touting beautiful women, drinks, and oftentimes both. The doors to the establishments were wide open, and some of the wares called down from the second story windows to the prospective patrons below. Music drifted from one building to the next and mixed into something not even dub-step could create. The streets were crowded with pedestrians and cars. People shouted at each other and the single-finger salute flew high above some of the less patient taxi drivers.

I drove down the road I spotted my objective at the far end of the street on the left side. It was a three-floor building with the usual blackened windows. The front doors were shut, but the lights were on over them and in some of the upper floor rooms. An alley separated its right side from the neighboring establishment, a classy place that forked out boos to anyone willing to drink their gut-rot.

I couldn't tell what kind of a place was this Wolf's Den. No music blared past the windows and the doors opened only long

enough to let the sleek, beautiful patrons slip through. A long line stood outside the building, but it didn't look like it was moving very fast.

I turned around at the end of the street and parked my car block down from the place. If there was trouble, I didn't want my car's body paint to warn the troublemakers.

I walked past the line and to the double doors at the front. A goon the size of a bus stood on one side of the doors. He wore a white wife-beater shirt with matching pants. In his large, fat-fingered hands was a clipboard and a thick pen. He sneered at a teenage couple who stood in front of him.

"Scram, kids. This isn't for you," he told them.

"Oh, come on!" the boy whined. "We've been waiting months to get into this place!"

"And you'll have to wait months longer because you're not getting in." He tapped his pen against the clipboard. "No name, no invite, no dough, no getting in. Got it?"

"Will this get me in?" I spoke up. I held up my badge to him.

The goon leaned in close and squinted. A sneer slid onto his lips. "Yer gonna have to show more than that, lady. Where's the warrant?"

I pocketed my badge into my inner coat pocket and glanced past him at the closed doors. "I left it in my squad car, but I didn't come here to have a nice chat with you. We got a call there was some suspicious people wandering around the place. You seem 'em?"

"I ain't seen nobody but who I'm supposed to see," he quipped.

"Shame. I'm just going to have to look around the place. Is there a back door?" I asked him.

He snarled. "Why won't you just get? There's no trouble around here, so why don't you take your badge and-"

The sound of a gunshot echoed down the street. People screamed and threw themselves onto the ground. The goon rushed inside and slammed the door behind himself. I heard him draw a large bolt over the door.

I drew my gun and looked for the perp. It wasn't easy discerning panicked, running people from a prospective shooter. Cars drove past at illegal speeds and people scurried out of the other businesses to see what all the fuss was about. The situation needed another twenty cops to get this wild place under control.

"Stay down and stay back!" I shouted at the gaping onlookers.

"The sound came from there!" one of the people at the rear of the line yelled. They lay on the ground, but pointed a finger down the alley that ran along the side of the Wolf's Den.

I rushed down the line and hit the corner of the Wolf's Den. I peeked around the edge and saw nothing but the usual dark, suspicious alley. There were garbage cans, bins, cardboard boxes, and the typical clapboard fence at the far end. The alley ran for thirty yards before it hit the fence and separated, going left and right. The only light came from a single bulb over the side door of the opposite building.

I slipped into the alley with my gun against my chest and my heart beating a tune a heavy-metal band would appreciate. The screaming and panic behind me receded into the background. My eyes swept over the multitude of shadows. Nothing moved. My feet crunched softly on the loose gravel and dirt.

I reached the point where the alley separated. Darkness reigned over both paths and the ten-foot tall fence loomed in front of me. I decided on the left and leaned my back against the wall of the Wolf's Den. I chanced a glimpse around the corner. That way was a dead end that stopped at an outcropping of the Wolf's Den building. The rear of the place was shaped like an L and made a small little square. The back door stood ten feet from me and had a single flickering bulb over it.

The back door wasn't what had my attention, though. My eyes fell on a form on the ground. The person wasn't moving, and they didn't have any clothes on.

I rushed over to the person. They lay face-down, and there was a gun beside them. It wasn't a typical gun. This one had an ivory handle with a long barrel like a magnum. I rolled the person onto their back. It was a man of about forty with short brown hair. His lifeless eyes stared at me. There was a gunshot in his chest over his heart. Blood still oozed out.

I stepped over him and touched the barrel of the gun. Still warm. I had the weapon, but I couldn't tell if this was murder or suicide. I turned around and studied the dead man. There was just a faint hint of gunpowder on the chest, meaning the range of the gun was farther than his arm. That pointed to murder.

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CHAPTER 2

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. I whipped my head to and fro, but there was nothing there. It wasn't so much I heard or saw something was wrong as I felt something was wrong. It was one of those times where all the modern tricks of humans were thrown out the window in favor of pure primal instinct.

I stood and pointed my gun at the ground with my hands wrapped tightly around the grip. My quick breathing was the only noise I heard. My heart thumped against my chest. I stepped towards the back door. The entrance was metal and windowless. I raised my gun.

The door swung open and a large shadow flew out the entrance. It landed between me and the dead man and rolled until it hit the fence. Part of the shadow sat up, and it was then I realized the shadow was two men joined in combat. The man on top had his back to me. He lifted his hand above his foe and I could see something sharp glistened on his long fingers. Claws. Impossibly long claws.

I swung towards him and pointed the barrel of my gun at his back. "Freeze!"

He spun around and snarled at me. My mouth fell agape as I saw the outside of his face was covered in fur and his ears were pointed. He had long, sharp teeth and yellow eyes. His nostrils were overly large and constantly sniffed the air.

The man on the bottom took advantage of the distraction. He pushed his feet against the snarling thing's chest and shoved him away. The man flew past me and into the brick wall. He left an outline in the bricks that would have crushed a normal man's rib cage, but he pulled himself out of the hole. The creature-man dove at me. I got off a shot into his chest, but that didn't slow him down. He wrapped his furry arms around me and crushed me against his chest. My gun dropped to the ground at my feet.

"Give me the moonstone or she dies," he growled at his foe.

The man in front of us was a man. In the weak light I could see he wore a black business shirt and matching dark pants. He was tall, almost a head taller than me, with short, sandy-brown hair. His eyes were a shimmering red and he stood straight with an air of

confidence around him that made the guy in back of me quiver. There was a sly, confident grin on her face that would've made me swoon if I was the swooning type.

"Let her go and return what you stole," the fancy man demanded.

The thing that held me laughed. "You really think I'm that stupid?"

"You are if you don't let her go and give back what you've taken," the other man countered.

The man who held me shifted his weight. "Well, I'm not that stupid and I'm not letting her go! Now just let me pass with the girl and the moonstone or-"

I didn't get to find out what 'or' represented. The 'man' in front of us used dug his toes into the ground and pushed off towards us. His speed was incredible. He covered ten yards in two seconds, an enviable speed for us cops. The well-dressed man tackled the one who held me, but not before he was able to get off a long scratch across my neck.

I cried out and fell to the ground. Something wet and sticky coursed down my neck. My blood. He'd cut deep into me. I rolled over and looked behind me in time to see the suited man pick the other one up by his neck. My attacker squirmed and garbled for mercy.

"Please! Please!" he choked out.

The man pulled a gun from his pants and pressed it against his captive's temple. "No mercy for the weak. You know that."

He pulled back on the trigger. I shut my eyes. This gun had a suppressor so the sound was muffled, but not the effect. I opened my eyes and winced at all the blood and brain matter that was splattered against the brick wall. The living man dropped the other to the ground in a crumple of dead limbs.

He turned to me.

My eyes widened and I looked around for my gun. It lay a foot away from me. I dove for it and snatched it off the ground. The man walked towards me and I lifted the gun and pointed it at him. My hand shook so hard I could hardly keep the sight on his chest.

"D-don't come any closer," I gasped.

He kept coming. I fired two shots into his chest. Like the other man, they had no effect on him. I aimed again, but by this time the blood loss was too much. My arms fell useless to the ground and I

rolled over to cough out some dark, sticky blood.

The man knelt beside me and grasped my chin between his fingers. He lifted my head so we faced each other. I saw a softness in his eyes that calmed me. An idle thought of a soothing death flitted through my mind.

He smiled and shook his head. "You won't die. You're weak, but you don't live within our rules. Not yet." He leaned forward and caught my blood-stained lips in a soft, teasing kiss. The man pulled away and I blinked at him. He chuckled. "Don't fear the future, or the night. I protect my own."

He leaned down, but not for a kiss. His lips passed my face and pressed against the wound over the front of my throat. I winced at the stinging sensation of contact, but the pain wasn't as horrible as the agony I felt when he opened his jaws and bit into me. His teeth sank deep into my flesh, so deep that I wondered if he'd reached my wind pipe. I gasped when I felt his tongue flick out and stroke the deep wounds made by the other man.

A burning sensation originated from my throat and swept over me. I squirmed and thrashed on the ground beneath him. Every limb, every molecule of my being felt as though it was on fire. He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me closer to him, allowing him to push his teeth and tongue deeper and harder into me.

The pain sapped what little energy I had left. He pulled away from me and I could see his face was covered in my blood. The man lay my back on the hard, cold ground. I heard the distant call of police sirens as they approached our position. Backup. Randy must have worried when I didn't report in.

The man stood and his shadow loomed over me. The light behind him hid all his features but his glowing eyes.

"If you wish to live, don't seek me out," he warned me.

He strode past me. I tilted my head and watched him sling the naked body slung over one shoulder. He walked past me and did the same with the other dead man. The stranger gave one last glance at me over his shoulder before he trudged down the alley in the direction I'd come. I couldn't move my head far enough to follow him past the intersection. He disappeared, but my solitary existence was short.

Heavy boots raced up the alley and the light from multiple flashlights danced across the ground. Four of my fellow officers raced around the corner. They saw me and hurried over. One of

them, a young officer named Baldwin, knelt beside me.

"Jesus. . ." I heard him whisper.

"She okay?" one of the others asked him.

He shone his flashlight on my wound and shook his head. "I don't know, but we'd better call an ambulance ASAP." He turned his attention to my face and grasped my shoulder. "Hold still. Help's on the way," he promised. I opened my mouth to tell him about the man, but nothing would come out. "Save your strength," he insisted.

My strength saved itself. My head grew woozy and the world spun around me.

"Detective Selena? Stay with me! Don't fall asleep!" Baldwin yelled.

I would have been to keep awake, but this time I couldn't help but disobey the commands of an officer. My eyes closed and I slipped into a deep, exhausted sleep.

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CHAPTER 3

"Maria? Maria, you there? Come on, Maria, open your eyes."

I groaned and forced open my eyes. I lay in a white room on a white bed. It didn't take my detective training to tell me I was in a hospital room and in one of those stupid gowns. Close beside me sat Officer Randy in the flesh. He was a middle-aged guy with a graying mustache Tom Selleck would have envied and a heart that was pure gold. In his hands was a bouquet of flowers, and on his face was an expression of surprise and happiness.

"That's Detective Maria Selena," I scolded him.

"When I heard how they found you I thought it was going to be deceased Detective Maria Selena," he told me. He shoved the flowers in my face. "My wife thought you'd like to have these."

I wrinkled my nose. "I'm not much of a flower person." I tried to sit up, but my arms felt as heavy as a police cruiser.

Randy stood and placed a hand on my shoulder. "Whoa. Not so fast," he advised me. "The doctor's said you wouldn't be able to get up for a couple more days."

I squirmed atop the bed and flinched when my bruised neck complained. "How bad is it?'

"It wasn't good, at least by the pictures," he told me as he resumed his seat. "It looked like someone tried to slice your throat open, but you didn't have much bleeding by the time the medics got to you and they rushed you here. Got you stabilized and comfortable. That was two days ago."

My eyes widened. "Two days?"

He nodded. "Yep. You lost a lot of blood in that alley." He scooted closer to me and dropped his voice. "Any way you can tell us what happened in there?"

I closed my eyes and nodded. "Yeah. It was like some kind of nightmare. I responded to the call and there was the noise of-"

"We know that from the eyewitnesses. What happened in the alley?" he wondered.

"I went back there and found a naked guy with a bullet hole in his chest," I explained.

"Dead?"

"He wasn't playing it."

"Suicide or murder?"

"Judging by the gunpowder burns I guessed murder. The gun was by him and I was looking at it when two guys slammed through the back door of that place, the Wolf's Den," I told him.

Randy frowned. "We interviewed everybody in there. They said they didn't hear or see a thing."

I scoffed. "Then either they're all deaf and blind or they're lying. I know I saw those two guys come out that back door wrestling with each other. One of them grabbed me and threatened to kill me, but the other guy took him out with a gun from his waist and blew a hole in his head."

He nodded at my neck. "So which one gave you that memento?"

I reached my shaking hand up to my bandaged neck and sighed. "The one that was using me as a shield. He had these impossibly long nails and cut me as he went down."

"Any way you could identify these guys if you saw them?" he asked me.

I nodded. "Yeah, I think I can, especially the guy that's still alive. I got a good look at him while the other guy held me."

Randy leaned back and furrowed his brow. "So you're sure one had a hole in his chest and the other had one in his head?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Because I think we found those guys in the river the day before yesterday. Both of them were naked, but they had the bullet holes in the same place," he revealed.

I raised an eyebrow. "Any idea who they were?"

He shook his head. "No clue, but they're running their fingerprints through a federal database and-"

"-and you should stop bothering my patient so much," a male doctor spoke up as they strode into the room. He was a little taller than me with blond hair and an age of thirty. In his hands was a clipboard, and on his face was a bright smile. "This is the first time she's been awake in two days."

Randy sheepishly grinned and shrugged. "Sorry, doc. Just wanted to get the facts before our sleeping beauty here decided to have another long snooze."

I glared at him. "I don't feel that bad. Just weak," I argued.

"You lost quite a bit of blood," the doctor mused as he flipped through the paperwork on the clipboard. "Two pints, to be exact. A

little more and we wouldn't be talking."

"How long is this going to take to heal? I've got a murderer to catch," I asked him.

"They got Howard on the case," Randy told me.

I whipped my head to him and my mouth dropped open. "That idiot? He couldn't find a coat in a coat closet! Why wasn't I assigned to the case?"

"Well, for one you were near death, and another, you're a little too deep in this case as it is," he pointed out. "Besides, we haven't linked the bodies recovered in the river to your fun in the alley. Now that we know to compare blood samples, we can connect the cases."

The doctor raised an eyebrow. "Bodies in the river? They're related to my patient?"

Randy glanced at the doc. "I'd be glad to talk to you about it, doc, but it's under investigation. That means hush-hush."

The doctor smiled and shook his head. "I know a bit about confidentiality myself. That's why I need to ask you to leave, or this young lady needs to give her permission for you to stay in the room while I go over her charts with her."

"He can stay," I agreed.

The doctor shrugged. "All right. I've got some good news and some bad news. Which one do you want first?"

"The bad news first."

"You'll be here for a few more days. The lacerations on your throat were very deep, and we want to make sure your skin stitches together properly."

I cringed. "And the good news?"

"Our jello is outstanding."

I rolled my eyes. "I think you got the order wrong there, doc."

He chuckled. "Well, that really wasn't the good news. The good news is there isn't any lasting damage except for a nice scar across your throat. That'll fade, but it'll always be visible."

I rubbed my neck and winced. "Any way I can get this stuff off to scratch it?"

"Certainly. It's about time to change them, anyway," he agreed. He set his clipboard on a table opposite me and wheeled a tray over to my bed. On the tray was an assortment of gauze, disinfectant, and a pair of scissors. He grabbed a pair of scissors and leaned over the bed. "Now turn your head away and don't move," he warned

me.

I turned my head and sat still as he cut through the layers of bandages. His scissors went snip-snip and the soft cloth fell into piles on my lap. The last few layers fell onto my lower neck. The doctor started back and his mouth fell open.

"My god. . ." he whispered.

Randy leaned towards me and frowned. "How the hell did that happen?"

My heart rate quickened. "What? What is it?" I asked them.

"Your throat has healed," the doctor explained.

"Shouldn't it?" I countered.

He straightened and shook his head. "You don't understand. There were severe lacerations across most of your throat. It took a hundred stitches to close up the wound, and even then we weren't sure it was going to stay together."

"And it looks like what now?" I questioned him.

He grabbed the mirror off the tray and held it up. I leaned my head back. My eyes widened when they fell on my smooth, scarred neck. The scar was there, but there were no signs of separated or irritated skin. It was as though I'd had the scars for years.

I reached up and tapped the scar. There was a sensation of it being bruised, but nothing else.

My eyes flickered to the doctor. "You said you stitched me up. Where are the stitches?"

"Here," Randy spoke up. He picked up something from the lowest layer of bandages. It was stitching thread. "Must have come out somehow."

"Without ripping through my skin?" I pointed out.

The doctor leaned down and tilted my head away from him to look at the scar. "It's a miracle. . ." he murmured.

"When was the last time my wound was bandaged?" I asked him.

He grabbed the chart off the table and looked it over. "Last night. The nurse commented that the stitches were still tight and the two sides of skin appeared to be mending together."

I jabbed a finger at my neck. "All this happened in one night?"

He closed the clipboard and nodded. "So it seems."

"That's impossible. Your chart's wrong," I insisted.

"Doc, I think what my blunt friend is trying to tell you is that she wants some tests done," Randy spoke up. "You know, just to

make sure there isn't something wrong."

The doctor shrugged. "We could take some blood and skin samples, but my professional opinion is that there's no longer anything wrong with her. I could probably recommend she go home today."

"Finally some good news that I can really chew on!" I quipped. I tossed aside the thin, white bed sheet and swung my legs over the sides.

"Let me just prepare all the paperwork for your release and you'll be on your way," the doctor offered. He nodded at a small dresser. "A set of your clothes are in there. Feel free to put them on whenever you feel up to it. I'll be right back." He exited the room.

Randy waited until he was gone before he turned to me. His lips were pursed and he clutched the flowers tight in his hand. I frowned. "I've seen that look before, Randy. What is it?"

"Well, there was something about those two guys I didn't tell you, but after this-" he nodded at my neck, "-I think you might want to know."

"What about them?"

"The bullets that killed them? They were silver."

I blinked at him. "Silver bullets?"

He nodded. "Yeah. I saw them myself. Silver all the way through. Nice craftsmanship, too, before their points got flattened by the impact."

"So what's this got to do with me?" I questioned him.

He glanced over his shoulder. The door was open, but nobody passed by. He turned back to me and lowered his voice. "You ever read any werewolf stories?"

I snorted. "Yeah, under my covers with a night-light, why?"

"Well, you ever read about people getting scratched and becoming one of them?"

I rolled my eyes. "You're not seriously thinking that that's what happened to me, are you?"

He leaned back in his chair and shrugged. "I don't know, but there's something really weird about two guys floating down the river with silver bullets in them and your gash healing up so quick."

I hopped off the bed and walked over to the dresser. "There's nothing weird about my wound. I'm a fast healer," I told him. I opened a drawer and saw my purse lay among the clothes. A sudden draft and a stifled snicker caught my attention. I spun

around and found Randy covering his mouth and staring at me. "What?"

He straightened and pointed the bouquet at me. "You forgot something."

I followed the flowers and my eyes grew wide when I saw the back of the gown was open.

I whipped my head to Randy and snapped a finger at the door. "Out!"

He held up his hands and stood. "Just trying to help."

"You can help by getting out!"

"I'm leaving. I'm leaving. Oh, and there's something in those flowers you might really want," he added as he set the flowers in front of me on the dresser. They made a heavy clunk as they hit. He smiled at me and scurried out.

I furrowed my brow and picked up the flowers. They had a good grip. A very familiar grip. I unwrapped the cloth that held the stems and grinned. My gun. He'd snuck it in for me. I put the gun beneath my stack of clothes and packaged the flowers together as well as I could manage.

I grabbed the door and meant to close it after Randy, but a hand came from behind the door and snatched its side. The door was pulled from my grasp and opened to reveal the doctor. He had a clipboard in his hands again, and that ever-present smile on his face.

He held out the clipboard towards me. "I have your papers if you'd like to fill them out now," he offered.

I snatched the clipboard and grabbed the door knob. "Just lemme change and I'll get this right back to you."

He nodded. "Sure-" I slammed the door shut and proceeded to remove the drafty nightgown.

In a few minutes I was dressed, refreshed, and had the paperwork filled out. I opened the door and found the doctor standing outside in the hall. He turned to me and looked me up and down.

"You look like you're feeling better," he commented.

"Is that your professional opinion?" I quipped.

"Only as a man."

I looked him over for a name tag, but didn't see one. "What's your name, anyway?" I asked him.

A strange, crooked smile slipped onto his lips. "Doctor Lowell."

I handed back the clipboard paperwork to him. "Well, thanks for the fix, Doctor Lowell."

He shook his head. "I think the patient is the one who does all the hard work."

I shrugged and stepped away from him. "Yeah, well, thanks anyway. See you later."

"Tomorrow. I want you to come in for an examine tomorrow," he called back.

"Lucky me. . ." I muttered as I turned and walked away from him.

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CHAPTER 4

I walked down the long white halls of the hospital and out into the darkening day. The setting sun in the west warned me I had a half hour to get home. Unfortunately, I didn't have my car. Randy hadn't managed to sneak that into the room.

"Damn it. . ." I muttered.

My salvation was a bus stop by the hospital, and in a short time I found myself seated in a grimy, uncomfortable long leather seat. The bus bumped along the roads towards my destination, or close to it. The hospital was in a swanky part of town, but my apartment building wasn't, which meant I had to make a connection ride to get home.

I leaned my forehead against the window and sighed. My mind and body were still a little tired after my long nap at the hospital. I reached up and touched my neck. The soreness had all but vanished. I felt the soft, low ridge of the scar.

The hairs on the back of my head stood on end. I looked to my left across the aisle and caught an old woman staring at me. She turned away and stared intently at her window. I pulled my shirt collar higher to hide the scar. I hated to wear turtlenecks, but my scar was pretty noticeable. It looked like I'd tried to commit suicide with a chainsaw.

The bus came to my stop and I hopped off. The sun was just about gone and stars twinkled in the eastern sky. I looked up at those shining gas orbs and frowned. A strange pulling sensation swept through me. I felt like I had to be somewhere else, like I was late on an important dinner date with a friend I hadn't seen in years.

I squashed the feeling. It didn't make any sense. Nobody waited for me at a restaurant, or even at home. I lived alone in my dinky, squalid little apartment.

The next bus arrived and I hopped on. A few stops later was mine. I stepped off and looked up. Before me loomed an ancient brick apartment building. Its stoop steps were worn down from years of countless feet. The glass windows were foggy from all the smog. Drab curtains concealed most of the rooms from prying eyes, mostly thieves who wanted to case the lower rooms. That's why I

had a third-floor apartment. The only way was up a rickety old fire escape that had a landing at my bedroom window. A murder would have had to be suicidal to be that homicidal and risk those old, swaying metal stairs.

The hour was late when I walked through the faded lobby and up the stairs to the third floor. There wasn't an elevator. My weariness from earlier returned in full force as I shuffled down the hallway to my corner apartment. It paid to pay a little extra. One less neighbor to keep me awake.

I unlocked the door, slipped into my apartment and closed the door behind me. I flicked on the lights and tossed my purse on the table near the door.

"Good evening."

I started and pulled out my gun. A light was flicked on and revealed a tall, handsome man in a long black overcoat. He sat in my old chair and held a glass of wine in his hand. I neither owned wine nor that type of glass. He sat with one leg crossed over the other. His golden autumn eyes looked me over with appreciation.

"You're even more beautiful in the light and some decent clothes," he commented.

"Who are you? How'd you get in here?"

The man chuckled and swished the contents of his wine glass. "All good questions, and ones I'd expect from a police officer."

"I asked you some questions. Start talking or my gun will do the talking," I demanded.

"No need for violence." He gestured to one of my kitchen chairs that sat opposite him. "Please, have a seat. What I'm going to tell you may seem-well, a little fantastical."

"I'm fine standing, thanks, now just get to the talking," I snapped.

He sighed. "Very well. You asked my name and how I got in here. My name I will give as Shadow. As for how I got in-" he nodded to a window behind him, "I climbed through that window."

I frowned. "There's no fire escape out there."

"I know. It wasn't too easy. I must be out of shape."

I snorted. "You're not seriously trying to tell me you climbed up a brick wall to get in here with that glass and wine, are you?"

"I'm telling you exactly that, though I see you don't believe me," he mused. He shrugged and set the wine glass on the end table by his chair. "I suppose that's understandable, but maybe some

proof will make you the wiser." He stood and shed his dark overcoat to reveal a white buttoned shirt with elegant black pants and matching shoes.

I tensed and cocked the gun hammer back. "Stay where you are!"

He opened his arms and smiled at me. His tone added a calm, soothing ring to his words. "Will you really shoot me?"

I felt a faintness that tried to rob me of my clear thinking, but I had my gun to focus on and I kept that pointed at my 'guest.' "I will if I have to," I insisted.

"I don't think you will. No, I actually think you'll give me the gun." He took a few slow steps towards me.

"Stay there! I'll shoot!" I warned him.

He didn't stop his slow procession towards me. "Will you? Try it then. I dare you," he taunted me.

I aimed the barrel at his chest. He was larger than me and a hit to the limbs might not have slowed him. I took aim. My finger pressed against the trigger. I told it to pull back, but it wouldn't obey. My hand shook as I struggled with myself to shoot the damn gun. Perspiration ran down my forehead and I grit my teeth. The man came closer until he stood only two feet away.

He stretched out his hand to me. "Now give me the gun." My eyes widened as I loosened my grip on the gun and turned it around so the butt faced him. He took the weapon and tossed it onto his coat. "There, now we can talk like civilized people."

I took a shaky step back. My instincts told me there was something very wrong with this guy. Something not natural. I jumped when my back hit the door. An escape, but one I couldn't risk. Not with him in front of me. He closed the gap between us and set his hands on either side of my head. His golden eyes swept over me and his smile widened. "I don't think enough people have told you how beautiful you are, have they."

A warmth swept through my body and tingled my quivering flesh. The heat pooled between my legs and I ground my teeth together to stifle a groan. "Whatever. . .whatever you're going to do to me. . .do it and. . .and get it over with," I panted.

He chuckled. "It's not going to be as unpleasant as that. I think you're enjoying it right now, or would be if you weren't fighting me."

"I'll. . .I'll fight you all the way," I insisted.

He closed the gap between us and his lips brushed against my cheek. One of his hands slid down and cupped one of my breasts. I shuddered as he massaged my mound of flesh, but I was aggravated by the clothing that got in the way of his skin against mine. His other hand unbuttoned my shirt and opened it to reveal my pert, swollen breasts.

His whispering voice sent shivers down my body. "See? You're enjoying it."

I leaned back my head and bit my lip. "What. . .what are you doing to me?" I gasped.

He planted soft kisses down my cheek and neck. "I'm finishing what we started in that alley."

My mind flew back to the few nights ago. He was one of the fighters, that person who murdered that other man and then bit me. I tried to struggle, to cry out to my fellow renters, but my voice wouldn't obey. My whole being was focused on what he was doing to my body, my mind, my soul, and it was liking what it was feeling.

He pressed his body against mine and I could feel his throbbing need in his pants. "Relax. You're too tense," he scolded me.

"I. . .I don't want this," I panted.

He chuckled. "I thought police were always supposed to tell the truth."

The man swept me into his arms and carried me into my bedroom. He set me on the covers and unbuttoned his shirt. I watched him like one mesmerized. My body was one fire with an unbearable heat. It consumed my thoughts and filled me with a passion that demanded to be quenched.

He tossed aside his shirt and lay atop half of me. His left hand slid up my pants leg and I felt the fabric slice open beneath his hand. My leg and half my underwear was bared to the dark room. His hand toyed with the plastic band a moment before his fingers slipped inside. I gasped and gripped the covers when I felt his fingers coast across my wet, hot folds. My heart beat like a quick drum and I panted.

One of his fingers slid between my folds and stroked my sensitive clit. I bit my lip, but pressed myself into his touch.

His voice was now more growl than human. The sound made me tremble in anticipation. "I want to hear you."

His words filled my being with such lust and longing that I let out a loud, deep moan. My body erupted into a fire of desire that could only be quenched by his voice, his touch, and his taking of me. I squirmed beneath him. The fires were too hot for me. I needed satisfaction.

"Please," I groaned.

He raised himself onto his arms and I saw lust in his own golden eyes. His voice was strained, tense. He desired me as much as I desired him. "Please what?"

"Please take me. Make me yours," I pleaded.

His grin widened and changed to something more feral, more animal, more seductive. In a flash he tore away his pants and what remained of my clothes. He spread his warm, strong naked body over mine. His pulsing manhood slid into my wet opening. He stretched and filled me with himself, and I'd never felt so complete. He stopped at half his length and shuddered.

"So. . .tight," he gasped.

"Oh god," I groaned.

He made slow love to me. Each penetration was a labor of love that slid smoothly against my clit. Shivers of delight raced through me. I gripped his back and reveled in the feel of our joined bodies, our lustful union that evoked such delicious results.

Our groans and grunts filled the air. The minutes flew by in a haze of sensual pleasure. Our sweat-soaked bodies slid against each other. Our muscles tightened, relaxed, and tightened again. Each stroke brought more fire, more lust, more desire. It was never quenched. These new feelings of lust was like a monster that lingered inside me. It ached for a release only he could provide.

"Yes. Oh god, yes," I moaned.

He grunted and thrust faster. The increased friction heightened the terrible, untamed ache inside me. We reverted to animals. Gone was the gentle lovemaking, and in its place was an insatiable desire to rut. Our pants and grunts grew louder and louder. I clung to him and dug my fingers into his back. My body quivered as hints of orgasm washed over it. Just a little more. So close.

I leaned back my head and arched my back into him. "Yes! Yes! YES!" I chanted.

My body exploded with pleasure. It swept away everything but the feel of him thrusting inside me, pushing me on to greater heights. My white-hot lust consumed me.

The exertion left me satisfied, but exhausted, mentally and physically. He finished inside me and held himself up on his arms to keep from crushing me. We panted together for a few moments before he grinned down at me and brushed aside a few of my wet locks of hair from my face.

"Beautiful," he purred.

"What. . .what was that?" I gasped. It was difficult to keep my eyes open.

"Feral lust. I've waited far too many days to take you." His shining eyes looked over my face as he brushed my cheek with the back of one of his hands. "It seems you've quite bewitched me. I've never had such lust for one of my own before."

"An. . .an aphrodisiac?" I murmured. My mind couldn't fight against the coming sleep my body so demanded.

He chuckled and slid off me. "Not quite, but rest. I have a feeling we'll be doing much the same for a great many nights."

I unwillingly closed my eyes and drifted into sleep.

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CHAPTER 5

Daylight. That damn bright light in the sky. I pulled the covers over my head and tucked myself in for more sleep. The air was a little cold, so I wrapped my arms around my naked body.

Wait, naked body? I don't sleep in the nude. I opened my eyes and looked down at myself. The light through the thin sheets let me see that I was definitely naked. My eyes widened and I sat up. The sheets pooled into my lap as I looked wildly around me.

I was in my bed in my dingy apartment. The bed was a mess of tangled and tossed sheets, and the pillows were on the floor. My clothes lay in a pile beside the pillows. Bright, midday sunlight streamed through the grimy window that looked out on an alley.

I swung my legs out of bed and winced. My body felt like I'd shoved it through a meat grinder and molded it into loose burger patties. Every muscle was tense and sore. I stood and wobbled on my shaky legs. I stepped over to the pile of clothes and lifted my shirt. It hung loose in front of me and spun in a slow circle. The light from the window revealed all the tears and claw marks from last night.

I dropped my hand to my side and ran the other one through my clumpy hair.

"What the hell happened last night?" I muttered.

That wasn't to say I didn't remember it. I remembered everything completely, I just didn't believe it. Who would? I mean, I'd had sex with a stranger who climbed a four-story brick wall and broke into my apartment. Sure, he was handsome, but he was also a cold-blooded murderer. Hanging out with a guy like that was a big no-no for a police officer, but I wouldn't have minded another go with him.

"What?" I yelped out loud.

Had I really just wished for a trespassing murderer with the name of 'Shadow' to have sex with me? I shook my head. It had to be the two days I'd been out. I must've had my brains beaten more than the doctors noticed. Maybe I'd go back to that one doctor, that Lowell guy, and see what he thought about these strange urges. He seemed to know what he was doing, or at least he seemed to be good at pretending that he knew stuff.

I sighed and glanced at the clock on my nightstand. My eyes widened and my mouth dropped open.

"Shit!"

It was one o'clock in the afternoon. My usual shift started at nine. I jumped out of bed and slipped into my uniform. It was tighter than I remembered and I had to wiggle into the pants. The shirt was tight across the front of the chest, but I somehow managed to get the buttons together. I made sure the collar was high enough to cover the scar across my neck. The men gawked enough at my breasts, I didn't want them to use the excuse they were looking at my war wound.

I raced out of my apartment and ran into someone who stood just outside my door. I caught a heavy whiff of marijuana on their person. My training meant that I jumped back and grabbed the butt of my gun. A grungy-looking guy stood in front of me. His baggy shirt and pants were covered in stains and dust, and he had a lopsided grin on his face. His eyes were bloodshot and his shoulder-length hair was greasy.

He tilted his head to one side and looked me over. His words were slurred and he swayed from side to side. "Hey there, what's a girl like you doing in a place like this?"

"I live here. Who the hell are you?" I questioned him.

He shrugged. "I'm just staying with one of my buddies around here. We have a pretty good time together, but we'd have a better time if there was more of us." His lecherous eyes stopped at my tight shirt. "Yer kind of pretty. What do you say you come see us sometime?"

"Not interested," I replied.

I dropped my hand from my gun and pushed past him. He had enough smell on him for me to arrest him right then and there, but I'd have plenty of time to pick him up later once I picked up car so I could drive him back to the Precinct. As it stood, I didn't want to take a suspect into custody and have to ride a bus all the way to the precinct with him in tow.

I caught one of the downtown buses and reached the precinct by two. The precinct was one of those old marble buildings with a long flight of hearts steps up to the front door. Not exactly handicap accessible and she didn't have as much space as we needed, but the old girl had weathered through a lot of tough years and deserved the respect she got from the people who worked in her and the

neighborhoods we patrolled.

I climbed the steps and walked through the front doors. There was a long desk in front of me and hallways on either side. A short, swinging door at the far left side of the desk was a shortcut to the desks behind that one. That was the main department area where we processed suspects and spoke to witnesses. The place was a madhouse, but two o'clock was always a busy time for us. That was when all the druggies like my friend at the apartment woke up and made trouble for us.

At that moment we had half a dozen drug dealers being fingerprinted and marched to the back of the building where there was enough jail cells to fit the whole block full of dealers. My fellow officers were bagging and inventorying evidence, but that didn't keep them busy enough to miss my entrance.

I walked through the swinging door and towards the back of the desks. I desk sat at the back close to the rear wall where there were separate offices for the higher ups. The guys, and most of them were male, looked up from their work and grinned at me. They weren't leering. Most of these guys were like brothers to me, and that made my job just a little bit harder. They teased me whenever they got a chance, and today I had a bullseye painted on both the back and front.

"Hey Selena! Aren't you supposed to be mummified?" someone shouted at me.

"I chewed my way through," I quipped.

"I thought you were dead," another teased.

"The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated, now if you gentlemen will excuse me I've got some trouble to cause," I returned.

I was nearly at my desk when one of the men stepped into my path. At six-foot-four he was a giant of a fellow with shoulders as broad as I was tall. He grinned down at me, and I rolled my eyes. His name was Detective Andrew Bart, and his desk stood opposite mine across the narrow aisle. We'd had our differences in the past, mostly on cases where we were shoved together. He always wanted to strong arm the truth out of everything, even if that meant breaking a few chairs and a few jaws. Needless to say, we didn't get along.

"What the hell are you doing here? The docs said you wouldn't be out of the hospital for at least a week," Bart commented.

I tossed my jacket onto my chair and tried to get around him, but he stepped in my way. It was like dealing with a movable brick wall, if I was out to insult the wall's intelligence. "I'm a fast healer, now mind moving? Stupidity is contagious and I've been in the hospital enough lately."

He sneered at me. "Why don't you take your sorry-ass excuse for detective skills and go back there?"

"Because then your sorry-ass skills would feel lonely, now move it." I shoved him aside more strength than I thought I possessed and marched to the back of the room.

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CHAPTER 6

The chief's square office sat against the far back wall. Through the windows I could see him seated inside in his chair. He was bent over a piece of paper on his desk and scribbling something on the report. I opened the door and stepped inside.

"No," the chief told me as I came in.

I paused and frowned. "No what?"

"I'm not letting you have the case," he explained.

I stepped inside and slammed the door behind me. "Why not?" I asked him as I marched up to the desk.

He didn't bother looking up. "You know the rules. If you're in too deep you don't get the beat."

I slammed my hand on his desk. "But Howard can't solve this case! He's an idiot!"

"He's not involved and I didn't trust Bart to take the case, so he's got it," the chief told me.

I frowned. "Why didn't you trust Bart the case? I know he's an idiot, but this should be a pretty simple trail to follow. You've already got the victims, it should be a cinch to find something about the murderer on them."

The chief sighed and looked up from his paperwork. "Because one of the guys has been identified and he's got a long record with Bart. I didn't want that idiot Bart to bungle the case just to get one last revenge on him."

"Give me the name, and I'll give you some peace and quiet," I promised.

The chief shook his head. "I know you better than that, detective, and the answer is still no." He pushed a blank sheet of paper towards me and set a pen on top of it. "You're neck-deep, literally, in this mess and the only thing you're going to do to help is to be a good witness and write down of statement of exactly what you saw that night." I frowned and turned my back on. The chief's voice stopped me at the door. "Selena?"

I glanced over my shoulder at him. "What?"

"It's good to have you back, and next time try to steal little more clear of death," he suggested.

I couldn't help but smile a little. "I'll see what I can do."

I stepped outside the chief's office and walked to my desk. Unfortunately, Bart was waiting there for round two. He stood beside my desk and had his arms crossed over his chest.

"Don't you have a case to go or something? I asked him.

"You think I'm going to let you push me around just because you're girl?" he sneered.

I slid into my wheeled chair and looked up into his eyes. "No, you're going to let me push you around because I can."

Bart snarled and slammed her fist into my desk. My werewolf bobble-head doll twitched and danced. Bart leaned down towards me. "You can act all tough in front of the chief, but when you get out side this place you're no better than anybody else. Hell, you can't even handle yourself against a bunch of dead guys."

I narrowed my eyes. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I heard you said something about some guy saving you in that alley," he explained.

"Who told you that?" I questioned him

"The guys that responded to your request for help. Needed more than one guy to help you?" he sneered.

I growled, and my hand whipped out and grabbed his throat. I pulled down so he was face-to-face with where I sat in my chair. "I didn't need anybody's help. Randy called for backup, and the guy I muttered about is a suspect in the two murders, and hell will freeze over before I ask a murderer for help."

Bart's eyes bulged and his lower lip quivered. I looked past him at the rest of the office. The room was eerily quiet. Everyone was frozen in place and their eyes stared in shock at me. I shoved Bart away from me, stood and grabbed my coat.

"Now if you don't mind I'm going to-"

"Go home." I spun around and caught something in the air. It was my car keys. The chief stood outside his office door and nodded at the front of the building. "Go on."

"But-"

"I said go home, detective. Come back tomorrow with your statement, but leave your badge and gun at home," he ordered me.

I frowned at him. "Is this a suspension?"

"It's friendly advice. I recommend you take it, and a couple days off," he suggested.

I turned away from and stalked down the aisle between the desks. Everyone made room for me and in a few moments I was on

the steps of the precinct. The sun shone down on me, but all I felt was a creeping coldness inside of me. I stopped midway down the steps and lifted my hand to look at my upturned palm.

The chief was right, I needed a couple of days off. I had a temper, but I'd never lost my temper that quick, even at Bart. I sighed and ran my hand through my hair. God, did I need a drink.

The mention of a drink rang a bell in my memories. There was this one place I knew about that probably served up more than the usual fare, if their clientele was anything to judge by. I could get a drink, and maybe get some answers to what happened that night.

First, though, I needed to get my ride back. I walked around the precinct building and to the side. The employee parking lot stood there, but I didn't find my car where I left it. That was fine. I didn't expect to find it there anyway.

I walked through the parking not into the rear of the precinct. There was a fenced-in yard back there, the kind with spiral loops of barbed wire on the top and Beware of Dog signs posted every ten feet. The fence was made of heavy chain-link and had slats in the diamonds to hide what was behind it. I went to the wide, double-door gate and rapped on the chain-link.

The gate rattled and rocked as something heavy and loud hit it from the other side. Through the gap between the gates I could see a large Doberman pincer. It's white teeth dripped with drool and it snarled at me.

"Whoa there, Bessie," a soft voice spoke up behind the mutt.

"You're not feeding the dogs enough again, Ralph," I called through the fence.

The dog was pulled away by the collar and an eye peeked through the gap. "Selena, is that you?"

I grinned and jingled my keys. "Yep. Just come to get my car."

"All right, just hold your tail feathers," the eye replied.

The person stepped back and I heard a mass of chains being moved aside. The right-hand gate opened and revealed gray-haired man seventy. He sported a long, gray beard without a mustache and clear brown eyes that didn't tolerate stupidity. That was probably why Bart was never allowed back here. This was Ralph, keeper of the impounded vehicles. He stepped aside to let me pass and I slipped into the yard. I saw that the Doberman was chained to a metal stake behind Ralph. It bared its teeth at me and growled.

"I got to admit I didn't expect to see you this soon," he

commented.

"Come on, Ralph. You know me better than that," I scolded him.

He shut the gate behind me and turned to me with a frown. "I thought I did until I heard you didn't have enough sense to call for backup," he returned.

I rolled my eyes. "There was no way I could tell I was going to go up against that many guys."

"And that's why should've called for backup. If you don't know what trouble you're getting into then don't get into it alone," he insisted.

"Well, it turned out pretty okay," I argued.

He snorted. "Ending up in the hospital is-shut up!" The last part was directed at the dog. Its growling had grown louder and it pulled at its chain to get me. "What the hell is with you today? You know Selena!" Ralph shook his head and returned his attention to me. "Never seen him act this angry before."

"Speaking of angry, you'll see some real anger if you don't tell me where my car is," I warned him.

He waved off my threat and shuffled down the long row of cars that were parked against the chain-link fence. "Don't get your panties in a bind. Your car's just down the row here."

"Ya know, I could have you sued for sexual harassment for mentioning my lingerie," I teased.

"You could, but then I'm not giving you your car back," he quipped.

"Touché."

Found my car parked between a red Chevrolet convertible and a pickup truck that looked like it'd been through World War II twice. My beat up old station wagon wasn't exactly a beauty, either. The interior and exterior were made from that fake wood that was so popular in the seventies, and the seats were covered over to hide the holes in the cushions. There were love marks made by keys left by my admiring suspects and convicts. The inside smelled like wet dog on rainy days and an old woman's house on hot days. To top it all off, the headlights barely worked.

Ralph tapped the toe of his boot against one of the headlights. "I could ticket you for these," he commented.

"But you won't because you love me," I returned. I opened the driver's door and slid into the seat. In a moment I had the car

roaring to life. "That's my baby. You up for a little adventure?" I cooed.

Ralph came up beside the car and leaned into the doorway. "If you'd take my advice, and you won't, you'd stay out of this mess."

I blinked at him in my best innocence impersonation. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Your impersonation needs work, and I'm talking about you checking out this double murder case. The chief'll get mad at you if he finds out," he pointed out.

"If he finds out," I quipped. I grabbed the inside door handle and Ralph moved aside so I could slam it shut. I rolled down the window and gave Ralph a wink. "See you later."

"If you have a later," he retorted.

I rolled my eyes and waved at the closed gate. "Mind helping me make a clean getaway?"

He pursed his lips but walked back down to the gate and opened it. I drove through and gave him one final wave before I hit the road and into a whole mess of trouble.

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CHAPTER 7

I stopped off at my apartment to change my clothes. The druggy was nowhere in sight, but that was all right. I had a murderer to find.

I slipped into some street clothes and drove to the club district. My target was the Wolf's Den, and my hunch was right that after a few days most of the area investigation was over. There was a strip of police tape in front of the alley, but nobody was around to guard it. The front doors of the club was closed and nobody stood out front waiting in line. The gorilla must be put in his cage during the day and let loose to harass the teenagers at night.

I parked my car on the opposite side of the street and got out. The sidewalks had a few bumbling drunks who wandered from strip club to strip club, but otherwise the foot and car traffic was light.

I hurried across the street and ducked under the police tape. Even in the daylight the place was a little creepy. There wasn't a sound as I strode down the narrow alley. No birds, no alley cats, nothing. It was almost as if they knew something wasn't quite right and stayed away. Something I should have been doing if I had more sense and less curiosity, but when you had sex with a murder suspect it was hard to not involve yourself in the case.

The alley was unchanged from that night two days ago except for the chalk outlines of the bodies. They were a little squiggly from clumsy feet tromping on them, but were otherwise accurate. I knelt on the ground beside the outline of the second guy killed and traced my hand over the ground. There was just the usual pebbles and bits of glass and trash. Nothing special-wait a second.

I leaned forward and squinted. There was something on the ground. I pulled out a plastic bag with a small pair of hair pliers, and snipped the thing from the ground. I held it in front of my face and smiled. A hair. Not the brown mousy hair of the dead guy, but a dark black hair. That didn't mean anything in itself, but I was sure I could find a matching hair at my place and get a double comparison for the labs.

I tucked my treasure into the bag and slunk along the ground searching for anything else. There were a few bits of displaced gravel, some shoe prints, but nothing that really stood out. That

didn't discourage me. It was a miracle I found what I did.

I stood and pocketed the baggy. My attention was attracted to the back door of the Wolf's Den. The door was shut and the light overhead was off. I walked up and tested the knob. Locked. I jiggled the knob, but the clasp wouldn't slide out. Must have had something extra on the other side. That didn't mean I didn't get the door open just a hair, enough to give some daylight between the door and the frame.

A whiff of something swept over me. My eyes widened and my nostrils flared. I let go of the knob and stumbled back. I clutched my chest. My heart beat loud and clear. I stared at the door, it stared back acting innocent, but I knew better. Something was behind that door that was trouble. I couldn't put my finger or nose on what I smelled, but it raised my hackles. It was like a warning, a scent put there to keep intruders away. That meant that whoever that guy was who ran out of there that night, he was pretty desperate to break into the place and take that moonstone, whatever the hell that was.

I shuddered and ran a hand through my hair. After that whiff of whatever it was my nerves were shot, so I was done with the crime-scene detective work for today. I strode from the alley and had the bad luck to run into a familiar face on the street. Detective Howard.

Howard Talbot was a good guy, but he couldn't tie his shoelaces if his life depended on it. Even worse, he always liked to help out others who were tying their own shoes and it usually ended up in a tangled disaster of feet and laces. He was the guy you wanted to bring home to your mom, but regretted it the minute he tripped over the dining room rug and crashed into her china hutch.

Talbot was nearing forty with slick-backed brown hair and a lopsided grin ever-present on his face. He was moderately handsome except for the faraway look in his eyes. That was like a window to his soul, and they showed not everybody was hope up there. How he ever managed to become a detective I don't know. Maybe it was affirmative action for the mentally impaired.

We crashed into each other around the front corner of the Wolf's Den. I fell to the ground, but Talbot was a little bit more broad-shouldered than me and weathered the storm. He only stumbled back a foot and looked down at me.

"Selena! What are you doing here?" he questioned me.

I climbed to my feet and brushed myself off. "Just wondering if you needed some help."

He gave me that lopsided grin and wagged a finger at me. "You know you're not supposed to do that. The chief already gave me instructions to chase you out of here if I found you."

"That's fine, I was just leaving," I replied.

I slipped around him and to my car, the bag of evidence still safely tucked in my pocket. Like I said, a nice guy, but in this profession those guys finished last.

My first stop was my apartment. I rummaged through the sheets and pillows until my keen eyes caught on something on the mattress cover. Black hair. Another baggy, another piece of evidence. I took my little bags and drove uptown to the industrial district a few blocks from the river. That was where the police labs for the whole city were located. The lab building was a big, white concrete building with seven floors and a shit-ton of windows. How they kept all those things clean in the smoggy air of the industrial district I don't know. Maybe a fleet of window washers.

I parked my car and stepped out. My nose wrinkled. The smell of the area was usually bad, but that day it was downright rotten. It smelled like somebody took a skunk, a rotten egg, and mixed them together with some stink bombs to create a cocktail of stink that should've been branded too au de hell.

I walked into the building. The foyer took up most of the bottom floor and in the middle was a circular guard desk. I flashed my badge and was waved through. This wasn't my first time here and I went directly to the third floor. That was where they ran the tests for hair follicles and skin samples. Each floor had a couple of hallways that intersected and created large rooms filled with white, broad tables and stools hugging close to microscopes.

I walked into one of these labs and noticed a short figure on one of the stools. The person was hunched over a microscope trapped in admirable concentration. The mischievous side of me decided this picture was too perfect not to ruin, so I ducked down. Like a shark from a cheap special effects movie I meandered between the tables until I reached my target. I slunk around the corner of the closest table and edged closer to the man's back. Two feet. One. I reached out.

"I was warned you'd be here sooner rather than later," the man spoke up.

I frowned and straightened. "Was it the chief?"

The man spun around and revealed himself as a thirty year old guy with dirty-blond hair and a stoic demeanor. He didn't yet have the spectacles that graced most of those in his profession, but he squinted at me like he needed them. This was Jim Rambert, a specialist in identifying human remains through various small body parts.

"Yes, and you're a little late. He called me a couple of hours ago and I expected you to be here shortly after that," he commented.

"I had some samples to collect for you." I pulled out the baggies and held them out to him.

Jim took them and held them in front of his face. He glanced past them and to me. "Is this a personal or professional request?"

"Both."

"You know I'm not supposed to do one of those, and I know I'm not supposed to be helping you get deeper into this case," he reminded me.

I shrugged. "Then say it's a favor and that it's neither."

He rolled his eyes. "Favors don't really work that way," he argued.

"Come on, Jim, I'm begging you here," I pleaded.

He pursed his lips, but spun around and opened my bags. "Fine, but there better be a damn fine steak dinner in this for me."

I moved to stand beside him. "With extra helpings of mashed potatoes," I added. Those were his favorite.

Jim took each hair sample and put them on glass slides. "So what am I suppose to be looking for here, anyway?" he asked me as he bent over to inspect the first hair under the powerful microscope.

"I want to see if they're a match to each other, and if they match anything in our criminal database," I told him.

"I don't know about that second request. That's a little more dangerous than a steak dinner is worth," he commented as he put the second hair under the scope. "But I can tell you they're definitely identical." He looked up from the microscope and to me. "I know about the crime scene at the Lupine street, but where'd this other one come from?"

"What about matching the hair to the database?" I requested.

Jim pursed his lips. "If you don't want to tell me just say it. As

to the database, that'll take a day. We're a little shorthanded with all these caseloads coming in. Seems you're not the only precinct wanting favors."

"Call me when you get those results," I requested as I turned to leave. I paused and glanced over my shoulder at Jim. "Oh, and you don't happen to know where they dragged those bodies out of the river, do you?"

Jim returned his attention to his microscope and shook his head. "Yeah, but your chief already told me not to release that information to you."

"Come on, who's it going to kill to tell me?" I persisted.

"I heard it almost killed you the other night, and I'd rather not have that on my conscience," he argued.

"Come on. You know you want another steak dinner," I persisted.

Jim lifted his head and turned to me. "I'm not going to-" He paused and frowned. "You don't look so good. You feeling okay?"

I frowned and looked at myself in the beakers. He was right. My face looked a little red, and suddenly the room felt a little too warm.

"I'm probably just tired. Woke up too late, and this place smells worse than usual. They put sulfur in the smoke stacks today?" I asked him.

Jim shook his head. "Nope, just the usual junk, but how about I drive you home?"

I shook my head. "I'm fine, just need to get some fresh air."

He slid off his stool and began to pull his jacket off. "It wouldn't be any problem. I don't live-"

"I said I'm fine!" I snapped. He started back and his eyes widened. Even I was caught by surprise by my own quick temper. I sighed and shook my head. "I'm fine. Really. I'll just head home and see you tomorrow."

He raised an eyebrow. "I can call you with the results tomorrow," he offered.

I grinned. "Don't think I'm done trying to get those body locations out of you. I'll see you tomorrow, whether you like it or not."

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CHAPTER 8

I left Jim with that little bit of warning and left the lab. I stopped at my car and wiped my sleeve across my forehead. My whole body felt like it was slow-cooking in an oven. I tilted my head back and glared at the setting sun. Maybe it was this damn heat. I slid into my seat and turned on the car. The air conditioning blew on, and I leaned into the nearest vent. The cool air blew over me, but it didn't do anything for me.

I sat back and pulled on my shirt collar. Was it just me, or was the air getting warmer? If it was just me that was all that mattered because at that moment I felt hot. It wasn't the usual summer heat, either, but a kind that started between my legs and slowly burned hotter and hotter inside me. I felt like I was being warmed by a pair of strong, sensual hands that I couldn't brush away. They slid up and down my legs, covering my body in their erotic touches.

The heat from the hands pooled at my breasts. It felt like fingers massaged my pert mounds, and they swelled and pushed against my bra. I could actually see my shirt tighten against the strain of my larger breasts. I squirmed and bit my lip. My fingernails dug deep into both sides of the seat. The heated hands slid along my inner thighs and brushed against the bundle of nerves between my legs. I leaned my head back and panted. These feelings were so deliciously wrong, and yet they felt so right. I wanted more. My muscles tightened and bulged. Immense physical power flowed through me. I felt my fingers stretch and pierce the seat cushion. My tongue flicked out and brushed against my sharp, lengthened canine teeth.

A knock on my window started me and I whipped my head to my left. A bum stood outside my window, and he grinned at me with a toothless smile. The labs were close enough to the river to attract some of the rats.

He held out a dirty hand. "Got some change?"

The spell was partly broken. I looked away from him and raised one of my hands. The fingers were longer than they should have been, and the nails were sharpened to a point while I always cut mine square. My breasts still bulged against my shirt. I was still changed, but some of the heat had fallen back. It still bubbled deep

inside me, waiting for another chance to seduce me.

"Change, ma'am?" he pleaded.

"Y-yeah, sure," I replied. I fumbled for some loose change in my cup holder and handed it to him.

He tipped his sweater hat to me bowed his head. "Much obliged, ma'am."

"N-no problem," I stuttered.

I put the car into gear and sped off down the road. My frantic mind tried to grasp what was happening to me. This sensual warmth was pleasing, but it also scared the shit out of me. I couldn't understand what was going on, I only knew that I liked it and wanted to fall into its embrace and never have it let me go.

I wrinkled my nose and stuck out my tongue. That wasn't my mind thinking those stupid thoughts. It must have been the work of this stupid heat. I had to fight it. I had to win! I had to-

I had to get home. The warmth returned stronger than ever. It swept over me so hard that I gasped and slammed on the gas pedal. The car jumped forward and I almost smashed up a parked car on the side of the road. I swerved at the last moment and pulled back into my lane.

My save didn't save me from what was consuming me from the inside. The heat pulsed inside me like a living creature. Its warm claws tugged and massaged my muscles, pleading to be free of my earthly flesh. It wanted to feel things, to touch them and know them. It craved attention, and there was one person's attention it definitely wanted, but there was no way in hell I was going to search for a murderer just so he could have sex with me.

I reached my apartment just as the setting sun disappeared beneath the horizon. The streetlights flickered on and people scurried from the streets as the muggers and gang members slithered out from their daylight hiding places.

I stumbled from my car and up the stoop. My body felt like it was on fire. All I wanted was to get to my apartment and drowned myself in an ice-cold shower. My hands fumbled with the keys, but I finally managed to get the door open and get myself inside. The small lobby was draped in shadows and I hurried across to the stairs.

One of the shadows beside the stairs moved, and out stepped Druggy, as I now called him. He leered at me with his yellow-stained teeth and stepped in my way.

"Where ya going, baby?" he cooed.

"Get out of the way," I growled. My long fingers itched to give him a wider grin, but I fisted them and shoved them against my sides.

He leaned against one of the stairs walls and looked me over. "Why don't you and I go up to your apartment and get to know each other better?"

My hand snapped out and grabbed him around his throat. I pulled him off the wall and flung him behind me. He slid ten yards across the dirty floor. I spun around and growled at him. The man's eyes widened and he scrambled back with one of his arms raised in front of him.

"W-what the hell?" he yelped.

What the hell was right. I could see myself in his wide eyes. I was a monster. My eyes were narrow and wild, and my teeth were long and sharp. My clothes pressed tight against my body and some of the seams were burst open.

I turned away from that terrifying sight and hurried up the stairs. My vision was hazy, distorted. Everything looked brighter than it used to be, a little bit warmer. Like my body. I ground my teeth together and tried to will the heat away, but it was too deep within me, like it was a part of me.

I reached my floor and leaned against the wall of the landing. My heart beat like a hard-rock drummer and sweat flowed down my forehead in waterfalls. I wiped the salty water away and pushed open the door.

The hallway was quiet, but the building wasn't. I could hear my neighbors moving around in their apartments. There was the chinking of dishes and glasses, the low murmur of voices. People talked about their ugly coworkers, their stupid bosses, and those god-damn meter maids, and I could hear all of it. I'd never heard this much noise before. It buzzed in my head like a fly I couldn't swat or a bee I couldn't run from.

I clapped my hands over my ears and rushed down the hall. My apartment door was the entrance to my salvation. I fumbled for my keys and my shaking hands had trouble inserting the damn thing into the lock. I grabbed the knob to steady myself and froze. The knob turned in my hand. It was unlocked. I swung open the door and revealed my apartment.

The man, or whatever the hell he was, sat in the chair like last

night. There was a bottle of wine with two glasses on the end table beside him. He picked up one in his hand and swirled the contents. There was that devilish smile on his lip. The heat inside me yearned to jump at him, but I held myself back.

He bowed his head to me. "Good evening."

I didn't reach for my gun. That hadn't worked last night. Instead I stepped inside and closed the door behind me. I leaned my back against the entrance and glared at him.

"What the hell do you want?" I questioned him.

"What we both want," he returned. He gestured to the second wine glass. "Care for a drink?"

I ground my teeth together and shook my head. "I don't want a drink, I want you to get out."

The man took a sip from his wine glass and set it beside the other. His eyes fell on me and it was as though he struck me with a flamethrower. The heat inside me increased two-fold. It swelled over me like a thousand hands that touched all of me at the same time. My leg muscles thickened and I felt the seams of my pants tear open. I groaned and arched my back. The added pressure popped some of my shirt buttons and revealed my pert, swollen breasts. They were trapped inside the bra, but much of my fleshy mounds were exposed above those flimsy pieces of cloth.

The man's eyes widened. He stood and walked over to me. His eyes swept over me and I shuddered beneath their heated gaze.

"I see. So you're already going through the change," he commented.

He reached me and grasped my hips in his hands. My nostrils flared as a thick, woody scent flowed off him and over me. The heat inside me flared up and I whimpered. He bent down and planted teasing kisses on my neck. His whispered voice was strained and held a tinge of a growl in each word.

"You're a quick learner. I wonder how quick you will come when I take you."

His words broke my restraint. I lost myself in his scent and touches. He pressed his body against mine and slid his hands down the ripped seam of my pants. They tore in two and fell to the floor, along with my underwear. He leaned down and kissed the exposed flesh of my bulging breasts. I whimpered and clutched his head in my hands. He growled and thrust his hips against mine. I groaned when I felt his stiff, throbbing need hidden inside his pants.

He scooped me into his arms and carried me to the bedroom. My shirt and bra were torn away, and were soon joined by his clothes. He covered my naked body with his own and thrust deep into my hot, wet core. I moaned at the feel of him stretching my walls, completing me like no one else could. He penetrated me again and again, thrusting hard and long into me. This wasn't a night for slow love-making. I needed him to take me rough and make me his.

Because I was just his, wasn't I? All day I'd craved his touch, his scent. I'd denied it to myself, but now, with him inside me, I couldn't deny him anything. My body ached for him with a burning desire that could only be quenched by this wild, sexual frenzy. We were consumed by our lust and rutted like a pair of wild animals. The sheets and pillows were shoved aside. The mattress rocked and heaved beneath us.

I clutched onto my lover and reveled in the complete feeling of belonging to someone else. He was the alpha, and I the beta. Every one of his firm, hard thrusts spoke of his dominance over me. My hips rocked with him, but only with his will. I did nothing without him. I was nothing without him. At that moment he was my world, my lover, my only one.

When I spoke I hardly recognized my own voice. There was a deep, guttural tone to the words that belied the tense, sexual animal need that burned inside me. I was more animal than human, and oh god did it feel good.

"Yes! Yes!" I growled.

My beastly lover grunted and thrust harder into me. Each push of his hips drove me deeper into this animal existence, this primitive need to be taken and filled by a dominant male. I clutched onto him and squirmed beneath his hard, sweat-soaked body. I'd never given myself so completely to someone else but to him I gave everything, and in return he showed me a pleasure like I'd never known. My body shook with the trembles of my orgasm. I was consumed by his body, his flesh, his being.

My orgasm swept over me like a hot pool of water. I threw my head back and let loose a howl that echoed off the bedroom walls. He joined me soon after in this wonderful bliss and let loose his own loud, echoing howl to tell the world of his conquest.

My lover collapsed beside me. He wrapped his arms around me and brought me close to his chest. His warmth washed over me

like a soothing blanket. I tried to keep my eyes open, but I couldn't. Wild animal sex was too exhausting not to sleep. I closed my eyes and slowly slipped into a deep slumber.

The last thing I knew was his voice calling from the darkness a few words of warning. "Don't try to find me."

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CHAPTER 9

It was like a bad rerun. I woke up naked in my bed with a delicious sex hangover. The warm sun through the windows told me I was late to work, if I had work to go to. I swung my legs over the side of the bed and ran a hand through my wild hair. This was getting nuts. I had this murderer wooing me like he was some sort of midnight Casanova. And what the hell was with that warning?"

"Don't try to find me. . ." I whispered.

I raised my head and grinned. Ominous and probably good advice, yes, but a stupid thing to say to me. Anyone who gave me an order was daring me to disobey it. That meant Challenge Accepted, and to hell with the consequences. That is, if I could actually pull it off. I had bits and pieces of the puzzle, but no picture yet and the box was lost. That meant a lot of footwork for me today.

But first, I had to play with an old enemy of mine: paperwork. I still had to turn in my statement to Howard, not that it'd help him much. Still, I had one hell of a problem, and it had to do with a certain shadow.

I stood and paced the room. To tell them or not to tell them about my liaisons with not only a murderer, but the murderer they were looking for. I had proof it was the same guy. The hair did that. I was an upstanding-well, I was a fellow cop. That counted for something.

I heard a knock on my door.

"Selena? You home?" It was Randy.

I glanced down at myself. Still naked. I peeked my head outside the bedroom and looked to the door. "Gimme a sec!" I slipped back into the bedroom and hopped into some clothes that weren't torn to shreds. Those got tossed under the bed with the monsters.

"If you're just getting dressed, I could help you," he called back.

I hopped into one sock and rolled my eyes. He was happily married and had a kid. I hopped into the other sock and to the door, and opened it. Randy stood on my threshold with a small

yellow envelope in his hand. He held it out to me.

"Happy birthday!" he quipped.

I raised an eyebrow, but took the envelope. "It's not my birthday," I reminded him.

He grinned and shrugged. "I know, but Jim wanted you to have this. He called me up and asked me to hand it to you personally. Something about he didn't want you to ask him any questions."

I frowned and tore open the envelope. "He's pretty sneaky for a geek. . ." I muttered.

"I think it's because he's a geek that he's so sneaky," Randy commented. He looked past me at my apartment. "How you doing, anyway? The chief told me you were off for a couple of days. Needed a vacation or something?"

I snorted as I pulled out a slip of paper. It had Jim's handwriting on it. The hair samples were at the bottom in a small plastic bag.

I turned the paper around so it faced Randy. "You ever able to read Jim's writing?" I asked him.

"Never tried." Randy leaned forward and squinted. "Looks like something about no much found in the bagelbase."

I flipped the paper around and tucked it back into the envelope. Randy's partial decryption told me what I wanted to know, but not what I wanted to hear. "Maybe I'll just go bother him about it later," I mused.

Randy straightened. "Don't you have a statement to turn in today?" he reminded me.

"I was just about to start it when I heard this knock on the door," I told him.

He grinned. "Glad I could help. Anyway, the chief said to take that down when you're done. Be seeing you." He turned, but paused halfway and glanced over his shoulder at me. His eyes narrowed and studied me. "You do something different?"

I frowned and shook my head. "No, why?"

"You just look different. I don't know, just something about your hair or your clothes." He studied me for a while longer and then shrugged. "Guess it's just me. Anyway, good luck on the statement. I know how we all love doing paperwork."

I grabbed the door and smiled. "And we never do it enough," I quipped.

He smiled and nodded. "Yep. Anyway, see ya."

"See ya." I closed the door behind him and turned away. My eyes widened. I swung the door open and jumped into the hall. Randy was halfway down and near the stairs. "Hey!"

He paused and glanced over his shoulder. "What?"

"You answer the call about the bodies they found in the river?"

Even at this distance I could see him roll his eyes. "Really? Here?"

"Did you?" I persisted.

Randy threw up his arms. "No, I was too busy with this idiot detective who doesn't know when to call for backup. Besides, the chief said no-go on telling you anything. You're on vacation, remember?"

I snorted. "More like solitary confinement, but I get your point."

"Later."

"Bye."

Randy walked down the stairs and out of sight. I returned to my apartment and shut the apartment door, this time for good.

"Damn. . ." I muttered.

There went the easy way to learn the location, and Jim wasn't talking, either. I'd just have to go to another source for the info. It wasn't reliable, but it was a source.

My source was located in the seedier part of the old downtown where the buildings had flat roofs, few floors, and a clientele that made the Wolf's Den look chic. Skyscrapers were those dark shadows far away in the sky and the shadows in the alleys weren't as tantalizing as the one that haunted my nights.

The particular hangout for my source was a small bar at the corner of hopelessness and desperation. The city blocks around the squat, single-floor building were filled with vacant apartment buildings and office buildings with false fronts and false advertisement. Some said they were lawyers, others shoemakers, but they were all holes for drug dealers and swindlers. Maybe not in the order, but you get the picture.

The name of the bar was the Rusty Knife, a fitting name for a building that was held together by rust and bird shit from the pigeons that hung out on the roof. I walked through the stained wooden door and into the dark, smoke-filled room. The walls were

paneled in a depression black color that probably increased their customers' consumption of their cheap liquor and cheaper beer. Round tables sat in odd spots around the small room. Some had chairs, some didn't, and some had broken chairs that had limped through their sorry existence for more years than I'd lived.

The place was its usually rowdy self. Some people sat in their chairs slumped over the tables, others were slumped over the bar or coddling a large mug of the cheap alcohol. There were a few pool tables at the rear of the place. That was where the best light was to be found so nobody could cheat with weighted balls.

My target was a table in one of the darker corners at the far back. It was close to the bar, but not close enough that somebody on the stools could get a good look at the guy who sat there by himself. I walked through the mess of tables and some of the unconscious figures revived themselves enough to give me some tasteful compliments.

"Wanna fuck?" one slurred man asked me.

"Go fuck yourself," I quipped as I, like life, passed him by.

I came up to the table drenched in shadows and folded my arms across my chest. Before me sat a man in a heavy overcoat with a baseball cap pulled over his face. He wore black gloves and had an untouched mug of beer in front of him. On the table was a smart-phone with a large, bright screen. The screen was made so it could only be viewed from the front, so I couldn't make out what was on it. That was probably for the best. I would've had to arrest him fro some of his shady dealings.

Now you know how Quinn Stewart rolled in the underworld, and he was the one who would have the answers for me.

"You busy, Quinn?" I asked him.

His voice was scratchy, but strong. That spoke of youth, or at least some years fewer than his husky, twelve-packs-a-day type of voice. Even after dealing with him for five years I still couldn't place his age. "Yep," he quipped.

I slid into the chair opposite him. "Good, because I want some info."

He didn't lift his head from the screen. "You ever take a hint?"

"Nope, but I'll take some info. That is, if you have it," I quipped.

Quinn never could resist a challenge, especially when it pricked his pride. He lifted his head high enough to glare at me

with his dark eyes. His face, what little I could see between the cap and the high collar of the overcoat, was pale. Sunlight wasn't usually on the agenda for him.

"I've got everything."

I leaned back in the chair, folded my arms across my chest and shrugged. "You might not have this info."

He shook his head and returned his attention to the smartphone. "I'm not letting you do this to me again, detective."

"Do what?" I innocently asked.

"Give you info without the dough. No dough, no info," he insisted.

"I've got dough, but how much depends on the answer," I returned.

He shook his head. "I don't work that way, not with customers," he persisted.

"What about old friends?"

He snorted. "I didn't get into this business to make friends, now show the dough or leave."

I rolled my eyes, but plopped down a small roll of bills. Quinn raised his head and reached for them, but I grasped them in my palm and slid them out of his reach. "You've seen the dough, now let's see if you've got my answer."

His eyes flickered to me and he retracted his hand. "Shoot."

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CHAPTER 10

"I want to know where a pair of bodies were found along the river. They each had a bullet-"

"-hole in them and the bullets were made of silver," Quinn finished for me. He tapped his fingers across the touchscreen faster than I could count to ten on mine and read from the results. "They were discovered three nights ago along Mortum Street. It runs-"

"-along the river for five miles before turning off at the bay. Yeah, I know where it is," I assured him. I nodded at the smartphone. "Anything else your crystal ball can tell me about them?"

"The victim with the bullet wound in the chest was Benjamin Sullivan. The second man was Steven Dunn. Known felons with rap sheets a mile wide. Dabbled in drug-dealing, thefts in nightclubs, assault, the usual. Steven Dunn was convicted of assaulting an officer five years ago," he told me.

I leaned back and pursed my lips. "What the hell would two-wannabe big boys be doing at the back of the Wolf's Den?"

Quinn leaned forward and pulled the pile of cash towards him. "That's for you to find out, detective. I just gather and give the info. I don't guess anything from it."

My hand flicked out and I grasped his hand with the dough in mine. "Wait a sec. I'm not done yet," I told him. I reached into my coat and tossed him the envelope with the samples. "What about the guy who's hair this belongs to? Got anything on him? Jim down in forensics couldn't find a thing in our databases."

"I don't deal in forensics," Quinn commented.

"What if I were to tell you this hair has a load of info that you might want?" I asked him.

He paused. "I'm listening."

I nodded at the envelope. "What if I told you that's the hair of the murderer of those two guys?"

Quinn shook his head and pulled his hand, and the money, out of my grasp. "That'd be useful only if the precincts started paying me for their services. As it stands, nobody's asked for the murderer's name except you." He slipped the money into his overcoat and tapped his fingers on the screen. "Now if that's it then-"

"Moonstone."

Quinn froze and whipped his head back so hard his cap slid back a few inches to reveal his weathered old self. His face was an odd mix of smooth skin and wrinkles with deep-set eyes in his angular face. It was almost like half of his face found the Fountain of Youth and forgot to tell the other half. "What'd you say?"

"You heard me. I said 'moonstone.'" I leaned forward and studied his wide eyes and stiff face. "Know anything about it?"

He shook himself from his surprise and readjusted his cap. "Not much, but how do you know about it?"

I snorted and leaned my elbows on the table. "I thought you knew everything?"

Quinn studied me with his dark eyes for a moment before his readjusted himself in his chair and shook his head. "You don't know anything about it," he surmised.

"I know where it is, or at least where it was," I revealed.

"Give the address."

I snorted and shook my head. "This is the most interested I've seen you in anything since I've known you. That means the info I have must be pretty important, and I'm not handing it to you until you can tell me everything I want to know." I tapped the envelope. "Everything."

Quinn sat still for a moment before he pulled the envelope towards himself. It was soon tucked away into the bowels of his overcoat. "What else did you want to know?"

"I want to know about this moonstone. What's so important about a common gem that everybody wants it bad enough to kill everybody else?" I questioned him.

He shook his head. "This isn't your typical moonstone. Rumor has it it was found by Roman soldiers in the far east."

"So it's what? An old rock?" I guessed.

Quinn tapped on his smart phone for a few seconds. "The rarity lies in its purported ability to give anyone who touches it superhuman strength," he told me.

I snorted. "Seriously? So it's like the anti-Kryptonite for humans or something? Gives them super powers and stuff?"

He lifted his eyes to mine and didn't blink. I saw a seriousness in their depths that made me gulp. "Not quite. The Roman soldiers brought the gem back to their encampment and reported their find to their commander, who took it to present to his wife. The next day there was an ambush by the local warriors and most of the

soldiers were slaughtered. The few who survived were those who had touched the stone. The soldiers believed the stone was the cause of their increased strength, so they took the gem and retreated to the nearest encampment. They were reprimanded for the loss of such a strategic position and awaited their punishment when the full moon rose."

I frowned. "You're not seriously going to tell me they turned into werewolves, are you?"

"That's how the legend goes," he admitted.

I rolled my eyes and threw up my arms. "First silver bullets, now tales of werewolves. What next, Count Dracula walks into the precinct armed to the long-teeth with stakes?"

Quinn swiped his screen and it went black. "If you don't want my information then don't waste my time asking for it."

"I want the facts, not some legendary story about a rock that turns guys into werewolves," I told him.

"You asked why the moonstone was so sought after, and I gave you that info," he pointed out.

"Does anybody really believe that bullshit?" I retorted.

"I've been getting a lot of requests, high-level requests, for info about it."

I raised an eyebrow. "Were those two guys who got shot up some of the questioners?" I asked him.

He nodded. "Yes, but they're not the high-rollers I'm talking about. These people make those chumps look like saints."

"Got any names to these high-rollers?"

Quinn shook his head. "I don't give names unless I'm told I can, or the client is dead," he informed me.

"Then what info could you give them?"

"The story I related to you, and the name of the last known owner," he told me.

"And that was?"

"Doctor Thomas Lowell."

My eyes widened and my mouth dropped open. "Are you serious?" I asked him. He stared at me without speaking. I sighed and leaned my elbows on the table. "Okay, so you're serious. Did these guys recognize the name?"

Quinn shook his head and pocketed his smart phone. "I've said all I've wanted to say for today."

"So we'll continue this conversation tomorrow?" I quipped.

"If you have the info to trade," he countered. "Now what about the address for this moonstone?"

I grinned and slipped out of my chair. "I'll have to get back to you on that one. I can't quite remember what the address is, but I'm sure I'll think of it tomorrow after you tell me some more stuff."

"Don't do something you'll regret," Quinn warned me.

I stepped backwards away from the table and shrugged. "When do I not do something stupid?"

"When you deal with these people," he replied. He leaned over the table and his eyes caught mine with their intensity. "These people aren't the usual crowd you deal with, and this isn't a simple murder case. If you'll take my advice you'll keep yourself out of it before you're in over your head."

I raised an eyebrow and frowned. "Thanks for the warning, Quinn, but I'm a big girl. I can handle myself."

"Like you handled that situation in the alley?" he quipped.

My hands balled into fists at my sides. "I'll admit that was a rookie mistake, but it won't happen again. If all you've got for me are some doom-laden warnings then I'll see you tomorrow."

I turned and left the bar without looking back. Sometimes he really pissed me off.

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CHAPTER 11

At least Quinn was useful. That story about the moonstone was a load of bull, but the address where the bodies were found was real. I got into my car, but paused as I put the key into the ignition. My neck was reflected in the rear view mirror. I pulled down my turtleneck and touched the scar with the tips of my fingers. There was no physical feeling from them, but a shudder went through me.

"Werewolves. Silver bullets. . ." I muttered.

I rolled my eyes and started the car. This city was getting weirder by the day.

I drove down to the district along the river where Mortum Street sat. It was a nice ruin of a district with washed out factories and shuddered warehouses. The type of place you'd want to take your girlfriend if you wanted to scare the heck out of her. The classiest part of the place was the river itself.

The poor old thing meandered through the industrial district like a shambling old woman. The gray hairs came from the sewage that dripped from the abandoned pipes. They stuck out from the embankment near the wrecked factories and leaked their filth into the slow, muddy waters of the river. Nobody claimed ownership of the properties, and the city was too busy wasting money elsewhere to want to clean it up themselves, so there they sat messing up everything downstream of them.

The air smelled like sulfur and rotting fish. The marine life needed an extra gill to siphon the sewage through their bodies.

It didn't take me long to find the crime scene. The place was marked by the usual yellow-colored Do Not Cross police tape. The perimeter stretched from the bumpy, cracked concrete road down the steep, muddy embankment to the river. The place was littered with litter. There were mattresses, tires, fast food bags, everything a Post-Modern or Post-Apocalyptic artist could have ever wanted.

I stepped out and looked around. The place was covered in boot and tire tracks. I wouldn't be following any suspect trails. I walked around my car and to the edge of the steep embankment. Thirty yards below me was the water. It lapped against the grimy bank and made a horrible squishing noise.

Most of the footsteps were centered around a spot along the

bank. I ducked under the tape and skidded down to the spot. There were tiny flags to mark the placement of the bodies. I could just imagine a photographer taking a picture and the bodies being hauled up the hill. Must have been fun. At least the were still in good shape after such little time in the river.

I lifted my head and frowned. The victims had been found only a day after their deaths. I turned and looked up the slope. I could see two-thirds of my car above the lip of the top. The road was deserted. I could barely hear any traffic, and nothing moved in or on the water.

How the hell did they find them so fast?

That was something I'd have to wrangle out of Randy or the chief. Probably Randy, if I could corner him.

I made to climb the hill, but something made me freeze. It was a whiff of something, something that didn't smell like anything else in the area. I raised my nose to the air and gave a deep sniff.

Big mistake. My nose filled with the overpowering scent of wet dog. I clapped a hand over my nose and tried not to gag. Whatever it was it'd been here recently, and there'd been a lot of them. Maybe it'd been a pack of wild dogs. They were known to roam the streets in search of trash cans and first-born. The only problem with that theory was neither of those options were anywhere near this wrecked dump.

Another problem was the scent came up the road in the direction my car was pointed and made a straight beeline for the flags. I glanced over my shoulder and squinted at the ground. My eyes caught on some footprints in the mud. They were dog footprints, but it must've been one hell of a mutt to make something that size. They were at least a size twelve in men's, and were long and narrow. The points of their claws dug deep into the muck. At that depth the pups must've been carrying a good weight above those paws. I wondered how anybody had missed them.

I knelt down and drifted my hand over one of the prints. A feeling inside me told me something smelled fishy, and it wasn't the three-eyed variety that swam in the river. Guys with silver bullets in their bodies, dog tracks the size of a Volkswagen Bug, that bullshit story Quinn gave me. Even if it all was a load of bull somebody was obviously going to a lot of trouble to get me to believe otherwise.

I stood and climbed the hill, but not towards my car. I

followed the dog tracks up the slope and onto the road. They led down the road in the direction of the active industrial district. I checked my watch. Two o'clock. My stomach growled. I'd skipped breakfast and lunch. Food had to come first. I hungered for steak. Then I'd come back and follow those tracks. Something told me I'd find some useful bits of info at the end of that paw-shaped rainbow.

The Rusty Knife wasn't an option. Their food was so under-cooked it threatened to eat you. I knew another place not too far away. It was one of those old diners with the row of stools and a narrow row of booths with faded, patched cushions. The place was old, but clean, with crystal-clear counter tops and swept floors. The lady who handled the counter chain-smoked her way up and down the stools. She wore a white apron over her plain pink shirt and calve-length skirt, and somehow got through those long days in short heels. I don't know why she bothered with the apron. Food didn't dare spill on her.

Her silver-streaked hair was pulled back in a tight bun and her well-manicured hands rang up the price of meals faster than any hacker. There was always a smile on her face for her old favorites and a sneer on her lips for the not-so-favorites. Matilda tolerated stupidity less than I did.

Fortunately, I was one of her favorites. I walked into the rectangle-shaped diner and to one of the empty stools at the back. Matilda looked up from talking with a hard-hat wearing customer and smiled at me.

"Look what the cat dragged in," she quipped as her eyes followed me down the counter to my seat.

I slipped onto the stool and leaned over the counter. "How are things here?" I asked her.

She strode over to me and shrugged. "The same. Jeff's threatening to quit if I don't give him a raise-"

"Because you haven't given me a raise in ten years!" a voice shouted from the back room. A man Matilda's age stuck his head out the swinging door that led to the kitchen. "And I will, too, if you don't!"

"Your food's second rate, and so is your sex, so get back in there and cook this girl up a steak," Matilda snapped. Jeff frowned, but slipped back into the kitchen. The pots and pans rattled loud in

the rear. Matilda turned her attention back to me. "Don't ever get married, hun. Your husband will be demanding every cent you have." She sighed and there was a small smile on her lips. "But lord do you love your man."

"Even when you've been married to him for thirty years?" I teased.

She nodded her head. "Even then, but enough of me. What'll you have with that steak?"

I started back. "How'd you know I wanted steak?" I questioned her.

She laughed. "Just because I'm not wearing a uniform doesn't mean I don't see anything. You got that hungry look in your eyes that I see in the hard hats when they want a real juicy steak. T-bone or prime rib?"

"The rib, and a side of-"

"Mashed potatoes. Already got 'em coming," she assured me.

Matilda wrote the order on a piece of paper and walked over to the window in the wall that separated the kitchen from the space behind the counter. She slapped it down on the metal shelf of the window and rang a bell like it was service hour on Sunday.

"One cow almost mooing and a side of Irish!" she called out.

Jeff raised his head above the window and glared at her. In his mouth was a half-spent cigarette. "Ya don't have to yell, woman, they can hear you at the city jail."

"You always say the nicest things," she quipped.

He grinned. "You know I do, baby. I'll have this plate done in no time."

It wasn't quite that fast, and by the time it arrived I was famished. My stomach growled like a V12 engine revving for a chance at the drag races. Matilda set the plate down along with a steaming mug of coffee.

She tapped the large white mug. "You look tired, so I thought you could use this," she told me.

I picked up my knife and fork and shoveled into the food. "I guess," I mumbled through the food.

Matilda leaned against the counter and looked me over. "There's no guessing on my part, hun. You've got that tired look in your eyes like you've been out on the rails all night waiting to play chicken with an oncoming train. This murder case got you down or something?"

I snorted and nearly choked on my food. "Nothing gets past you, does it?" I asked her as I took a swig of the coffee. I nearly choked on the coffee. It was as black and rich as a Texas oil field. "What'd you put in this stuff? Tar?" I questioned her.

"Nope, just a load of beans, which is what you're not gonna give me when I ask you what's wrong," she persisted.

I shoveled away the last bits of my steak and potatoes. I'd never eaten that fast in my life. I was surprised the fork and knife hadn't caught the steak on fire. "We'll just say I haven't been sleeping well," I admitted as I pushed the empty plate away.

"Or eating well. You act like a half-starved dog," Matilda commented as she took the plate.

I shrugged. "When you're on a case you don't-"

"Starve yourself to death," Matilda insisted as she put the plate on the window sill. Jeff grumbled about more work, but took the dirty dishes. Matilda leaned over the counter and looked me in the eyes. "Now you promise me you'll keep better care of yourself and keep out of trouble, ya hear?"

I grinned and slid off my stool. "I can promise the first one, but the guys I deal with are going to try their hardest for me to break the second."

"Then you call for backup next time and make sure they don't get that chance," she insisted.

I tossed down enough cash for the meal and waved to her. "Bye, Matilda, and thanks for the coffee."

"Don't let me hear about you getting in trouble again!" Matilda yelled as I exited the joint.

I stepped outside into the hot afternoon air. I still had enough light to do exactly what Matilda didn't want me to do: get into trouble.

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CHAPTER 12

I slid into my car and drove back to the river road. Everything was as I left it, so I followed the tracks down the bumpy, muddy road. The road followed the river out of the city, but the prints turned off down a ramp that led into the rat-maze that was the industrial district. Huge, billowing plumes of black smoke was pumped from the brick smokestacks that sat beside the large brick factories. The parking lots were filled with the cars of the workers. Forklifts and semis with their loads drove in, out and around the places like busy worker bees.

It was into this jungle that I drove, and it was at the first paved parking lot that I lost the trail. The paw prints walked onto the hard pavement and disappeared. I stopped the car and stepped out. There was no sign of the prints, and I couldn't smell anything through the sulfur and burning coal. The trail was cold. I wondered if they'd gone this way on purpose.

I slipped back into my car and drove through the district to the streets beyond. One lead was dead, but I still had the good doctor to talk with. He had some explaining to do about owning that moonstone, and why anybody would be asking around for it. Maybe even killing for it.

I got to the hospital a little after four and headed to the front desk.

"Is Doctor Lowell in?" I asked the receptionist.

The woman was portly with as friendly a smile as a cobra. She studied me over the top of her horned glasses and frowned. "Do you have an appointment?" she questioned me. Her words were as sharp as her tongue.

I leaned over the counter. "No, but I need to ask him some questions about a case."

I flashed my badge. It didn't effect her like the Vulcan mind-meld it usually was. "I'm afraid he's a very busy man, so you'll have to make an appointment to see him. He'll be glad to answer any questions you have then."

I pursed my lips and pushed off the counter. "All right. Maybe next time." I half turned, paused, and turned back. "Where are the bathrooms?"

She scowled, but pointed down the hall to my left. "Down that hall and on the right."

I smiled and gave a nod. "Thanks."

I walked down the hall and started looking for what I needed. They always had one of those things in these large buildings, and I swear I saw one the day I left. I found what I was looking for near the bathrooms: a visitors map of the entire hospital. It showed all the wings, including the one with the offices of the doctors. None of those had names, but it took up only a floor of one of the wings.

I took one of the elevators and was soon in the long hallway filled with doors. On those doors was a nameplate for the owner of the room. The hall was empty, so I strode down the passage looking for my target. I found his door at the end of the hall near a window.

I also found trouble.

"Hey, what are you doing down there?" somebody yelled.

I glanced down the hall and saw a large black guy in a white coat march towards me. The stethoscope around his neck gave away his occupation as a doctor. He was supposed to be in that hall, but I wasn't. I slapped a smile on my face and pulled out my badge.

"Hi. I'm just looking for Dr. Lowell so I can ask him some questions. You don't happen to know where he is, do you?" I asked the man.

He scrutinized my badge and the frown didn't slip off his lips. "No, and I'm afraid you just can't wander around here looking for the doctors. There's a lot of sensitive equipment and dangerous illnesses to consider," he scolded me.

I tucked my badge into my pocket. The damn thing wasn't doing me any good here. "So you don't know where I can find him?"

He shook his head. "No, and I'd be grateful if you left. You can make an appointment to see him at the front desk."

I bowed my head. "Thanks. I'll do that." Sometime after hell froze over.

I slipped past him and down the hall. This day was turning out to be a big bust. First the paw prints disappear, and now the-

"Lowell!" I yelped as I rounded the corner.

We'd nearly crashed into each other. He caught me about the shoulders and his eyes widened as he studied me.

"Detective Selena? What brings you here? I hope not another malady," he commented.

I shrugged off his hands and shook my head. "No, just some

work. I wanted to talk to you about a stone in your possession."

The other doctor came up behind me. "Should she be here, Tom?" the other doc asked Lowell.

"It's fine. I'll take responsibility for her," Lowell assured the black guy.

"All right. See you later." The doc passed by us and disappeared.

Lowell smiled at me and gestured down the hall. "Won't you come into my parlor?"

"Not exactly the best 'hello' to give someone, doc," I pointed out as I followed him back to his office.

He chuckled. "No, I suppose not, but I don't get to use it too often." He unlocked his door and opened it. "Ladies first."

I stepped inside and saw it was a mess, even by my standards. There were open books and papers all over the desk, and the walls were covered in bookcases with dusty shelves. The floor was treated like another shelf with stacks and piles of more books.

I managed to find a chair in the disaster area and sat down. Lowell took a seat in a chair on the other side of the desk. He leaned back in his seat and twined his fingers together in front of him. "Now how can I help you?" he asked me.

"I was told you were the last known owner of something called a moonstone," I informed him. "The men who were murdered the night of my attack were looking for it."

He raised an eyebrow. "Were they? I had no idea it was so valuable."

"To them it was worth their lives trying to get at it, and it cost them that much," I commented. "So what can you tell me about this little gem?"

He shrugged. "Only that it's been a family heirloom for quite a few years. I'm fond of it, but I'm afraid it isn't much to look at. Would you like to see it?"

"You keep it in your office?" I wondered.

He chuckled and turned his swivel chair to a shelf close to his right side. "This is probably the safest place in the world to put it. Even if someone did go looking for it, it would take them days to find it," he pointed out. Lowell pushed aside some large-bound books and reached far back into the shelf. He pulled his hand out and his fist was clasped around something I couldn't see past his fingers. He turned to me and opened his palm. On his hand was a

small white-purplish gem about the size of a walnut. The colors swirled around small deposits of crystals, and the white parts resembled quartz in their clearness.

It was a plain rock, but there was something alluring about the stone that I found almost irresistible. The feeling was like finding something you'd been searching for for years. I reached out my hand, but Lowell pulled it out of my reach. I shook myself and leaned back in my chair.

"So that's it?" I asked him.

"That's it," he assured me.

"And you have no idea why someone would think it was valuable?"

He closed his hand, leaned back and shook his head. "No idea."

I nodded at his fist. "Do you mind if I keep that? For evidence?" I asked him.

"You're on duty already? As your doctor, I'd advise you take a few weeks off," he suggested.

"Well, not exactly on duty just yet," I admitted.

His smile fell off his lips and he frowned. "Then you're not part of the official investigation?"

"Not exactly," I replied.

"That's a lot of inexactness on your part, detective," he commented.

"Detective work can be an inexact science sometimes, especially when you're dealing with people," I pointed out.

The smile returned to his lips. "Yes, I suppose it can be." He glanced at his watch. "But it seems I have to cut this lovely conversation short. I have some patients waiting for me and some of them are quick to point out that I'm late." We both stood, and Lowell turned away from me and deposited the stone in its hiding place. "I hope you won't tell anyone where this is hidden," he mused.

"Only the police," I replied.

He paused and turned to me with a frown. "I hope that won't be necessary."

"If it's evidence it's necessary," I told him.

"I see." He stepped around the desk and blocked the door. "But seeing as you're not on the case they shouldn't find out."

The small room and him in front of me didn't give me much space to breath. I backed up and my legs collided with some stacks

of books. They fell over, but both of us ignored the worse mess. My attention was on Lowell, and for the first time I noticed a strange look in his eyes. They were firm and cold, like a predator. It wasn't a look you'd expect from a doctor.

"They might find out if they follow my trail," I commented.

He took a step towards me. "That brings up a very interesting question. How did you find out those two men were after my stone?"

I reached for the gun in my pocket and took a step back. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up and I narrowed my eyes. "I don't reveal my sources."

Lowell stopped his advancement on my position and smiled. It wasn't one filled with warm fuzziness. It was more like a jackal biding its time. "That sounds very illegal coming from a detective."

"Sometimes you have to look the other way to find what you want," I returned.

"I see." He stepped to the side and swept his hand towards the door. "Then it seems our conversation is done. I hope to see you soon."

I didn't take my hand off my pocket as I slipped around him. "Yeah, maybe," I replied.

I stumbled from the book-stuffed room and out into the hallway. After that stuffy room the sterile hallway was a breath of fresh air. I strode down the hall, but at the end I stopped and chanced a glance over my shoulder.

Lowell stood in front of his office with that twisted smile on his face. Whatever was passing through his mind I didn't want to find out, so I left the hall and that hospital.

This day was just an endless stream of dead-ends, but my luck was about to change.

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CHAPTER 13

I walked over to my car and pulled my keys out of my pocket, but something made me pause before I inserted the key into the lock. It was the familiar smell of the river sewage, but it wasn't coming from me or my ride.

I inserted the key into the lock, but my eyes flickered to my right. The parking lot of the place was the usual rectangle with cars facing each other in rows separated by a lane wide enough for two cars to pass. My eyes fell on a particularly plain car among the line of cars that faced mine. It was a dark-blue four-door sedan. A guy sat in the driver's seat staring at his smart phone screen and casually glancing at the hospital. He wore dark glasses and a dark gray suit. His brown hair was cut short, and his hands were covered in thick black gloves.

Nothing too unusual, but my nose told me his tires had ran through the river muck recently. My eyes followed the scent and I noticed there was some dried mud in the treads. Either he'd taken a strange joyride, or I had a problem on my hands.

I slipped into my car and started the engine. The guy didn't flinch. I backed out. That got his attention. He put down his cell phone and started his engine. I drove down the parking lot as he pulled out of his spot. I left the parking lot, and he was like a ten-second delay in time with my driving. He drove out and turned onto the same street and stopped at the same light to turn left. This guy was tailing me.

I had two options. The first was to pull over and see if he didn't want to talk. Judging by his face he didn't look like the kind of guy who wanted a heart-to-heart chat with who he was tailing. That left the second option: losing him. I had some experience doing that on a few of my wilder cases.

"All right, Mr. Sedan. Let's see how your car rolls," I muttered to myself.

My eyes flickered to the red light ahead of me. The green light on the opposing traffic ticked to yellow, then red. Mine turned green, and I stepped on the gas, but I didn't turn left. I swung the wheel and took a sharp right. Fortunately I didn't cut anybody off, but I did tick off my tailer. He was a little slow following me and

through my rear view mirror I swear I saw him throw around a few words he didn't learn in kindergarten.

I sped down the road with my tailer in hot pursuit. Traffic was light which was both good and bad for me. I wouldn't be dying a horrible, fiery death rear-ending a Ford Pinto, but I couldn't lose him in the crowd. There was also the problem of other officers. I wasn't above being given a ticket for reckless driving, and I didn't think a judge would let me off because I was being tailed.

That meant I had to take the back roads and lose him in the alleys. I turned the wheel and bounced into an alley on my right. Alley cats and rats scattered ahead of me, and behind me my tailer screeched into the alley. His car kissed a few garbage cans on the way in and that gave me some breathing room.

The city blocks around the hospital were filled with towering office buildings with shiny windows, but the ground between them was a mess of dirty alleys. The roads were more like mud paths filled with obstacle courses made up of garbage cans, cardboard boxes, and hobos. I veered left and right to stay straight on the bumpy, uneven roads. Building side doors and screeching alley cats flashed by in dark blurs. The blue sedan was still in my rear view mirror, but it wasn't gaining.

I took a sharp left onto one of the major roads in the downtown district. It was a one-way street with traffic backed up for a block from the intersection. I saw flashing lights and guessed there was an accident at the light. There wouldn't be any way I could escape my tailer sitting in that mess, and I was lucky the alley came out at the tail-end of the lineup. I spun the wheel and performed a pretty good one-eighty against the traffic. It wasn't the right way on the street, but I wouldn't be on the street long. An entrance to another alley was half a block down. All I had to do was get there and get to the side streets, and I'd lose him.

I sped by the mouth of my former alley and passed by the tailer coming out. I gave him a wave and a smile, and he returned with a scowl. He spun his wheel and bumped out of the alley.

Bad move.

He was so focused on me he didn't see the oncoming traffic. A large white van slammed into his driver's side fender and door. It pushed him a few yards down the road and slammed his side into the rear of another car that waited in the long line. It caused a domino effect of rear-ending that ended five cars down. People in

this city just didn't know how to give anybody any space. I'd hoped the guy would've stuck around to give the officers his name, but he jumped from his car and sped off down the nearest alley.

My damage there was done, so I swerved around oncoming traffic and slipped into the alley. Behind me I could hear yelling and swearing. Maybe they'd pick up the guy's name from the car, but something told me a guy that smartly dressed wasn't that stupid. The car was probably stolen, and his gloves wouldn't leave any fingerprints to match.

I reached my apartment at about five. The sun hadn't started setting yet when I unlocked my door and stepped inside. A Shadow stood by the curtained window that opened to the alley. I had a visitor.

"Isn't it early for you to be bothering me?" I commented as I slammed shut the door.

The man stepped from the shadows of the curtains. There wasn't any sign of his wine or wine glass, and he glared at me. "I told you not to look for me."

I tossed my car keys and wallet on the table beside the front door. "I guess I didn't hear you."

"You're playing a dangerous game here. One you don't understand," he warned me.

I walked over to the couch and leaned against the back so I faced my uninvited guest. "Then why don't you enlighten me?" I suggested.

"That would put you in greater danger. I've already risked your safety too much by coming here tonight," he replied.

I crossed my arms over my chest. "Then why come?"

His eyes swept over me. The heat in their depths excited my body, and I felt a warmth spread over me. I tried to shove it down, but it bounced back with twice the strength as before. He moved so he stood in front of me. His hands grasped my shoulders and he pulled me against him.

"Your scent drives me here. It risks both our lives for a chance to smell you, to touch you," he whispered.

My heart beat loudly in my chest and I felt my face flush with warmth. I tried to keep a grip on to my detective persona. My voice quivered, but the words got out of my parted lips. "I-I don't understand. What scent? Why me?" I questioned him.

"Because I claimed you, and you are mine," he growled.

I shuddered at the tension in his words. His voice was more animal than human. He longed to take me, to make me his, and I lusted for the same. He leaned forward and caught my lips in a searing kiss. His hands pawed at my shirt, my pants. Each of them were cut through by his nails and dropped to the floor in shreds. I wrapped my arms around him and moaned into the kiss. His fingers danced across my bare skin. Only my underwear and bra remained. My bare flesh pressed against him. He was hot to the touch, we both were.

I broke from the kiss and gasped for air. "How?" I moaned. How could he do this to me? How could he break my will and get my permission to take me with the passion of a lover?

"Mine," he growled.

That was the only explanation he gave, and the only one he needed. His lips pressed a hot trail down my neck to my heaving breasts. They swelled and strained against my flimsy bra. Their pert nipples pushed out from the cups and begged for attention. He cut through the straps and the bra slid down my stomach to rest on my bent arms.

My lover's hot gaze swept over my nakedness. I leaned back to give him a better view. He growled and pressed me closer. His warm lips nipped at my sensitive mounds and teased my nipples. His hands brushed against my smooth buttocks and pulled off my underwear. He massaged my rear and ground his hips into mine. I gasped as the size of his need pressed hard against my hot center. He picked me up off the floor and I instinctively wrapped my legs around him.

My lover moved us to the closest wall where he pressed me between the rough sheet rock and his hard, tense muscles. He tore off his shirt and pants and stood naked in front of me. His pulsing member teased my entrance for only a moment before he plunged himself inside me.

His penetration filled me both physically and mentally. He stretched my walls and soaked himself in my warm juices. I leaned my head back and reveled in the feeling of our completeness. I was nothing without him inside me, filling me with his lust for my body. His hands and mouth worshiped my body. Nothing was untouched. My most intimate places were teased and stroked. We were covered in sweat before his first push inside me.

I grasped his shoulders and sank deep into the sensual feel of

him pulling in and out of me. Each penetration was a step towards a feral bliss, a carnal desire that lay deep inside us. It rose to the surface now and demanded satisfaction. Our sweat-soaked bodies pressed and tensed. We ground our hips against each other in this wonderful dance of lust and the primitive need to procreate.

I felt my muscles shift and expand. My fingers lengthened into sharp claws. Fur sprouted from my warm flesh. None of it mattered. There was only him inside me, pleasuring me to limits I could never have imagined.

"Fill me," I pleaded.

He grunted and thrust harder. His harsh breathing echoed in my ear. The sound of my groans filled the apartment. I clutched onto him and felt his rippling muscles burst with a thick coat of fur. His deep breathing changed to violent growls. The ends of his ears grew long and pointed. His manhood swelled inside me.

Our lovemaking turned to a rut. I clutched to him as he penetrated me again and again. Each time brought with it greater bliss, but also a greater appetite for the pleasure. I squirmed and screamed my joy.

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" I yelled. "More! Oh god, more!"

He grunted and thrust harder into me. My muscles quivered with my coming orgasm. I leaned my head back and reveled in the feel of that beautiful pleasure as it washed over me. He jerked into me and froze as he spilled into me.

I was exhausted. It wasn't easy losing a tailing car and getting my mind and body fucked like never before. I slumped against his shoulder and sighed. My heavy eyes closed and I basked in the warmth of our sweat-soaked bodies.

"Sleep," he whispered.

And damn it, I did.

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CHAPTER 14

Ring. Ring.

I groaned and buried my head deeper into the cushions. "Go away. . ." I mumbled.

Ring. Ring.

I growled and lifted my head. I found myself naked on my couch with only a blanket to cover me. The god damn ringing came from in back of the furniture. I sat up and glanced over the back of the couch. My clothes, or what was left of them, lay in a rough pile on the floor. The ringing came from them.

I leaned over the back of the couch and tossed the clothes to the side. My jeans went with my shirt, and the ringing went with them. It was my phone in my jeans pocket. The jeans hit the wall hard, but the rings just kept coming. I rolled off the couch, snatched the phone from its pocket and held it to my ear.

"What?" I growled.

"Don't give me a 'what,'" came the loud voice of the Chief. "You know damn-fucking-well why I'm calling."

I leaned my back against the wall and slid down it. "I'm getting a raise?" I quipped.

"You think it's funny to be bothering your doc?" he countered.

I ran a hand through my mussed hair and frowned. "What?"

"A Doctor Thomas Lowell called me twenty minutes ago to complain about you. He said you were bothering him with questions about the case," the Chief told me.

"That's because he's involved in the case," I replied.

"Not according to our records. The only way he's involved is because of you," he snapped.

"Not according to my sources," I argued.

"I don't care. Whatever trail you're sniffing it isn't official so we can't follow it. You know that," he growled.

"But-"

"Just drop it, detective. We've got Harold working on it, and there's a few of their buddies he's looking into," he assured me.

I stood and slammed my fist against the wall. "Chief, I'm telling you there's something else going on here. I don't know what, but my gut feeling is telling me this is more than just a double-homicide," I

insisted.

"Tell your gut to stop doing the thinking for you and take a vacation because I'm putting you on two-week's leave," he told me.

I jumped to my feet and glared at the floor. "What? Two weeks? What for?"

"For meddling in a case you're not assigned to and not taking it easy," he replied.

"But-"

"And any more arguments will get you another two weeks. You understand?" I ground my teeth together. "Detective, answer me," he demanded.

"Yeah, I get ya," I answered.

"Good, now get some rest. You sound awful." Click.

My arm to my side and my phone clattered to the floor. I leaned the back of my head against the wall and closed my eyes.

"Damn it. . ." I muttered. I ran a hand through my wild hair and a chill over my body reminded me that I was still naked. "What the hell is that guy doing to me?"

Drugs was my mind's answer. There was no other logical explanation for these sexual romps. Maybe an aphrodisiac or something similar.

"Don't find me. . ." I whispered. I snorted and dropped my hand. A sly grin slipped onto my face. "Yeah, right. Tag, I'm it."

There was something going on with this case, and I sure as hell wasn't going to let a whiny doc and some protocol get in the way. I glanced at the alley window. It was open now and I could see it was about ten in the morning. Nearly half the day was gone, but I'd try to make good on the other half. I tried to step away from the wall, but something held my right hand back. I glanced behind me and my eyes widened.

My fist was embedded three inches into the wall. The sheet rock had a nice hole where my fist was and little bits of it lay on the floor. The missing chunk was on the floor in the wall between the studs. I yanked hard and freed my fist. I raised it to my face. Nothing unusual about the fingers except for the dusting of sheet rock. I glanced between my hand and the wall. That was some solid sheet rock, probably because of the dozen coats of paint on it. I'd kicked the stuff before without making a dent. Now here I was throwing fists through it without trying.

I stumbled back until I hit the back of the couch. "Holy shit. . ."

I mumbled. "What the hell is going on?"

I couldn't answer my own question, but I hoped Quinn had some answers for me. I threw on some clothes and broke all the speed limits getting down to the old bar. The place was empty except for the bartender behind the bar cleaning a glass. That didn't bother me. Sometimes the place was dead, but Quinn was always there at his table waiting for info to walk through the doors.

I strode over to Quinn's table, but stopped halfway across the bar floor. His table was empty. The chair lay on its back on the floor and a half-filled mug sat in front of it. Something wasn't right. I spun around, but a shadow slipped out from near the front door. It was Mr. Sedan himself.

I reached for my gun, but the bartender threw the glass he was holding like an expert pitcher. My arm was half raised with my gun when the mug collided with my knuckles. The glass cut deep into my hand and forced me to drop my gun. It clattered to the ground and I dove for it, but Mr. Sedan dove for me. He was quick like a cat and pounced one me. His hand grabbed my arm and he spun me around so I faced away from him.

A rag was shoved into my face and a foul smell slunk into my nose and mouth. Chloroform. I had only a minute, maybe two, before I was overcome. Fortunately, Mr. Sedan was a mister and not a ma'am. I kicked my leg back and my foot collided with his family jewels. He wouldn't be trying to extend his lineage any time soon.

Mr. Sedan crumpled like a wad of paper in a kid's mouth. I pushed away his hands and broke for the door. The second guy dove at me and caught me around the legs. We both fell onto the hard ground. I twisted around and tried to rearrange his face with my foot, but he caught my shoe and pinned my legs to the floor.

Mr. Sedan stumbled over to us and grabbed my neck. He pulled my upper body off the floor and practically shoved the wad of chloroform-scented rag into my mouth and nose. I gagged and twisted my head, but he kept the rag tight against my face. The world grew out of focus and I felt the second guy let go of my legs. The next moment I lost consciousness.

Next thing I knew I was waking up from one hell of a chloroform hangover. The first thing I noticed was the heat. It was hotter than my apartment on a mid-August day, minus all the traffic

honking and people yelling.

I forced opened my eyes and found myself in a hot tin can of a building. The walls were metal, and so was the arched roof over me. From the post-apocalyptic atmosphere I guessed I was somewhere in the old industrial district. I was roped to a wooden chair that was bolted to the cement ground. A single light bulb was over my head and I expected it to swing at any moment. The only other bit of furniture was a wooden table to my right. On its top was a wish list for psycho murders. Knives, pliers, gloves, face masks. You name a creepy implement and it was there.

There was a metal door in front of me, but no windows. The door swung open and the odor that wafted into the sardine can of a building confirmed my suspicions about the industrial district. The air stank like the river. Mr. Sedan stood in the doorway. The weak light behind him told me the sun would set in less than an hour. He stepped inside and shut the door. It closed with a loud clang. The man walked around me while at the same time pulling the gloves off his hands and studying me.

"Take a picture, it'll last longer," I quipped.

He stopped by the table and gave a dry chuckle. The gloves were set on the top. "I'm not stupid enough to make evidence."

"You're stupid enough to get caught following me," I countered.

I saw the corners of his mouth turn down. "Merely a minor oversight, but it's been amended with your capture, Miss-" He picked up a small scrap of paper and I recognized it as my driver's license. "-Maria Selena. That has a nice ring to it, and very fitting for your life as it stands."

I frowned and strained against my bonds. "Let me go and I'll give you a good ringing."

"You'd try, but I'm afraid you wouldn't have as good a luck as last time. I underestimated your transformation progression before, but I won't make the same mistake twice," he commented.

"No, you just keep making different mistakes," I retorted.

The man picked up a long knife from the table. The weak light above me shone off the sharp blade as he studied its cutting edge. "Perhaps, but you'd better hope I don't make a mistake and let my hand slip." He turned to me with the knife still in his hand and walked over so he stood beside me. "You see, you have some information I want."

"And some you're not going to get," I replied.

He raised the knife and glided a finger over the edge. I saw a stream of blood flow from his skin. "Are you sure your life isn't worth more than the information you want?"

I leaned away from the self-mutilating weirdo. "Are you sure you shouldn't be in an asylum?"

He chuckled. "You're not the first one to suggest that, and I'm sure you won't be the last, but this isn't about me. This is about what you know, and what I want." He knelt in front of me and ran the flat side of the blade along my thighs. His contemplative eyes looked over my broad hips and pants. "I can see why he interests you, but he can't have much to offer you. Nothing more important than your life. So why don't you just tell me where the moonstone is hidden and we can part ways?"

I snorted. "Like you'll let me go."

The man smiled and stood. "Of course I'll let you go. I'll even drop you off near the bar where I found you."

"What? In a body bag? Don't think I got out of the detective academy yesterday. I've seen enough psychopaths to know you're one of them, and they don't like to leave loose ends. It ruins their fun to leave witnesses," I returned.

The smile faded from his lips. He reached out and grabbed my hair. The man yanked my hair back and I ground my teeth together to keep from crying out. "Listen, you little bitch. I want to know where that moonstone is. Either you tell me and I give you a quick death, or-" He pressed the blade of the knife against my bared throat. I felt a thin line of my warm blood slip down my throat. "I reopen that scar."

I was in a tough spot, but Lady Luck shined on me again.

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CHAPTER 15

Mr. Sedan didn't get more than a cut off me before a loud clang on the metal door caught our attention. He dropped his knife hand to his side and left me for the entrance. The man leaned forward two feet from the door and tilted his head towards the metal entrance.

"What do you want?" he called. The only reply was another hard pound. It sounded like somebody was throwing all their weight into that knock. Mr. Sedan growled, grabbed the knob and swung the door open. "If this is your idea of a-umph!"

The joke was on him when something dark and heavy was thrown into him. He fell on his back onto the ground. The knife slid across the hard ground and stopped just out of his reach. I got a good look at what held him down, and I wish I hadn't. It was the broken corpse of a man. The body was dark because it was covered in bloody, and bones stuck out at odd angles and cut through the clothes. The clothes were the only things that helped me identify the guy as the fake bartender. Somebody had used his corpse to knock on the door.

That somebody stepped into the doorway. His yellow eyes swept over the room and fell on me. Shadow. It wasn't the usual friendly wine-chugging Shadow, though. This one was half naked and covered in soft tufts of fur. His hands were long claws fitted with sharp points on the ends and he was partially hunched over. His yellow eyes blazed with a hellfire that nearly consumed the quivering mass of Mr. Sedan that lay on the floor.

Mr. Sedan threw his dead comrades body off him and crawled backwards. His back his the table. He spun around and groped for some of the tools of his sadistic trade. Shadow leapt forward and grabbed his groping arm. Mr. Sedan was lifted wholesale off the floor and came face-to-face with the full anger of my rescuer. Shadow's lips curled back in a snarl that revealed his long, sharp teeth.

Mr. Sedan shook his head. "N-no! No! Let go! Let-"

Shadow tossed Mr. Sedan aside like he was a rag doll. Mr. Sedan hit the wall behind the table and fell onto the top. The table collapsed beneath his weight and they both fell to the floor in a

mess of surgical tools and limp limbs.

Shadow turned to face me. Saliva dripped from his teeth and his heated eyes looked me over like I was a tasty pork chop. This little piggy wasn't going to let the wolf get her, so I twisted and struggled in my bonds. It was a no-go. They were too tight. I tensed when Shadow slunk behind me. My ropes did the opposite. They were sliced through and fell limp onto my tied hands. I jumped to my feet, pulled my hands up and over the back of the chair and ran to the open door.

I stumbled outside into the late-evening sunlight. The metal shed was definitely by the river. The muddy waters were only twenty yards away down a gentle slope of mud and trash. The shed itself sat in a row of other metal sheds, and I recognized them as the abandoned barracks. They were used by the army during the war and left to rot when the dough-boys went home.

My balance was impaired by my tied hands, but I still sprinted over the uneven ground. My foot caught on a sunken cinder block twenty yards down the line of building. I slid onto my side. Pieces of glass and rocks dug into my skin. I turned onto my back and saw Shadow stride towards me. He was less lumbering and more walking now. Most of his fur was gone and he didn't hunch over like before.

Shadow reached me and stood over me with an angry look on his face. He bent down and grabbed me by the neck, and lifted me off the ground like I weighed nothing. My legs flailed in the air and I leaned by head back to keep my neck far away from his hand. I'd already been knocked out once that day, I didn't want to set a record.

"What did you tell them?" he growled.

That was the final straw. Between the Chief yelling at me, the thugs kidnapping me, and now this guy accusing me of being a snitch, I'd had enough. I spat in his face. It was a bulls eye on the cheek. The spit didn't even make him flinch.

"You son of a bitch. I didn't tell them shit," I growled at him.

His eyes narrowed. "If you're lying to me then we're both dead."

I laughed in his face. "You might want to figure out a new threat. I've heard that one already today."

"Not from me," he corrected me.

"Yeah, because you holding me like this doesn't scream

'murder,'" I quipped.

Shadow lost a little bit of his nerve with that retort. He blinked and some of the deadly look in his eyes went away. He set me down on my feet and took a step back. "I'm not going to hurt you. I would never hurt you," he swore.

"You've got a funny way of showing it with looking at me like you were," I countered.

He shook his head. "The beast was only out to kill the other two. It left you unharmed."

"Well, if you're really on my side then get these off me." I half turned to show him the ropes on my hand.

He smiled and stepped forward. "Gladly." He used his long claws to slice through the thick ropes like they were my clothes.

I stepped away from him and rubbed my wrists in front of me. My eyes flitted between his face and those sharp claws. "Remind me to wear leather clothes from now on."

"I can also cut through those," he informed me.

"What about steel?"

"That would be more difficult for me," he admitted.

"And a little bit uncomfortable for me," I added. I looked over the roguish figure of my nocturnal delights. "Now mind explaining to me that trick you did back there with that fur coat and crunching a guy's body against the door?"

He turned his head left and right. "Unfortunately, I do mind. We don't have time for explanations. Others might come looking-"

"Why the hell should I believe a guy named Shadow?" I countered.

"Perhaps you shouldn't, but you have a good head on your shoulders, and right now I ask that you use it." He nodded at the tin can I'd been stuck inside. "The men who kidnapped you questioned you, but I doubt the answers were meant for their ears alone. Whoever wanted that information may be impatient and send more of their men."

I narrowed my eyes. "And do you know who this kingpin is?"

"Fewer questions, please, and we may get out of this alive," he returned.

I crossed my arms over my chest. "What do you care about me getting out alive or not? I'm just as good to you alive as dead."

"Our enemies are counting on you being wrong, and they'd be right in that assumption," he argued. "I won't leave you here to die,

even if I have to knock you out and carry you out myself. You've seen enough of my strength to know I can do that. Now which will it be? The easy or the hard way?"

"Great options. . ." I muttered.

He shrugged. "They're all I have for you."

I glanced around at our lovely surroundings. An old truck sat in front of the tin can the guys shoved me in. "If I do believe you, and I'm not saying I do, what do we do now? Steal their ride?" I asked him.

He shook his head and turned back to the tin can. "No, we'll take mine. I hid it a mile down the road. First, though, we need to acquire some information from our new 'friend.'"

I snorted and followed him. "With friends like that who needs mortal enemies?"

We stepped inside the hot oven of a building. The corpse was still on the floor in front of my chair, but Mr. Sedan at the table was waking up from his hard nap. He crawled onto his hands and knees and rubbed the back of his head. Shadow walked over to him and picked the suit up by the back of his neck. The man thrashed and squirmed in Shadow's hold, but the guy had one hell of a grip.

Shadow dragged the guy over to the chair and tossed him into it. Mr. Sedan fell head-first into the hard wood, but he righted himself and faced us with an ugly look on his bruised face.

"Who paid you to kidnap this woman?" he questioned Mr. Sedan. The man snapped his trap shut and glared at us, but Shadow wasn't the type of guy to say no to. He stalked over to Mr. Sedan and wrapped his hand around his throat. Shadow pulled their faces close together. "Tell me."

"Not on your life, prince," Mr. Sedan refused. He grinned and I saw something white between his teeth.

"Shadow, there's-" Too late.

The guy bit down hard on the white stuff and a silver-colored powder broke over his teeth. His body started to convulsion, and froth spilled over his open mouth. Shadow let him go and stepped back with a sneer on his lips. Mr. Sedan tilted his head back and the froth spilled over his chin. Whatever it was ate his skin away like it was a piranha. Blisters broke out all over his skin and his hands dropped to his sides. He slid down the chair and dropped to the floor in a pile of half-melted skin and bone mixed in blood. The smell was like putrid flesh being burned by acid. I covered my nose

with my mouth and tried not to gag.

I stepped forward to examine the body, but Shadow put his arm out in front of me. "Don't. Touching that will kill you the same as it killed him."

"What the hell was that stuff?" I questioned him.

"Liquid silver encased in a capsule," he told me.

I glanced down at the bubbling pile of flesh that was Mr. Sedan. "Silver? What kind of silver does that to a guy?"

Shadow shook his head. "It's not the silver that did it, but the curse."

I turned my gaze to Shadow. "Curse? Seriously? You're going to pull bullshit like that on me?"

He dropped his head and locked his eyes with mine. "After everything you've seen do you really think it's bullshit?"

I glanced between Mr. Puddle-of-Ooze and Shadow. "Right now, I'd believe in the Easter Bunny if it would give me some answers."

"Follow me and I'll give you them," Shadow promised.

He strode past me and out the door. I took one last look at the body, if you could call it that, and followed him. What did I have to lose?

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CHAPTER 16

I found Shadow walking past the truck and caught up to him just down the road. "Mind telling me where we're going to go after we get to your car?" I questioned him.

"To my home. Yours may no longer be safe," he told me.

"And your home is where?" I persisted.

"I have a townhouse two dozen blocks from here," he explained.

"A shadow with a townhouse? Trying to hide from the sun?" I quipped.

He cracked a smile. "Something like that."

I spotted a dirty jeep a quarter mile down the road. Shadow unlocked the vehicle and we slid into the seats. There was a cup holder between us with a tall, closed-lid water bottle in it. I picked it up and shook it. Something sloshed around.

"Shadows need to drink now, too?" I wondered.

Shadow started the car and turned us around. "It's water. You can have some if you want," he offered.

My mouth felt like a desert, but I put the water bottle down. "Pass."

Shadow picked up the water bottle and downed some of the contents. He held it out to me. "Do you still think it's drugged?" he asked me.

I frowned, but took the water bottle from him and drank some of the stuff. It was water, clear and cold. "Thanks," I replied as I dropped the bottle back into its holder.

"Don't mention it," he answered.

I looked out the window at the rusted warehouses and alleys used as dumps by the city's poor. My face was reflected in the mirror, and did I look awful. I was as pale and dry as an old sub sandwich, and there were dark lines under my eyes that looked like I'd botched a makeup job.

"So are you going to tell me who those guys were?" I spoke up without turning away from the window.

Shadow sighed. "They were members of a-a rival gang."

I glanced at him. "I know a lot of gangs. Which one was it?"

"Garu."

I raised an eyebrow. "I don't know that one. What neighborhoods do they control?"

"Half the town."

I folded my arms across my chest. "If they controlled half the town I'd know about it," I insisted.

"They make it their business not to let you know they're existence," he countered.

"So what else do they deal in besides kidnapping?" I asked him.

Shadow pursed his lips. "Everything. Drugs. Blackmail. Theft. Nothing is too low for them."

"So you're telling me there's this all-powerful gang controlling and terrorizing half the city and its crime, and the police don't know about them?" I pointed out.

"Yes."

I leaned back in my seat and snorted. "Are you insane?"

"If only I was. . ." he murmured.

I cast a glance at him. He looked straight ahead and his bright eyes didn't blink. I'd never seen a guy look so serious except when he was about to ask a girl to marry him. I jerked my chin at him. "Okay, say I believe you about this gang. What's your angle with them?"

"Mortal foes, if you'll pardon the dramatic expression," he explained.

"Uh-huh. So you're some sort of a superhero fighting against a shadowy crime syndicate?" I wondered.

"Not exactly. You can say that I control the other half of the city, but with a softer hand," he admitted.

My eyes narrowed as I looked at Shadow. "A crime lord's a crime lord, period. How little pressure you put on the people doesn't matter."

A half-grin slipped onto his lips and he shrugged. "Perhaps, but I'm all that stands between Garu and this city sinking into a cesspool of misery."

"It's easy to spout off how good you are when you're not telling me the whole story," I retorted.

"If I promised to tell you everything when we reached my home, would that give you any comfort?" he countered.

"It'd be something better than being kept in the dark," I returned.

"Then I'll tell you when we arrive," he promised.

"Good." I shifted in my seat. "So how far again is this place?"

"Just a few more minutes," he assured me.

I looked through the front windshield and pulled at my shirt collar. "Good, because this car's getting stuffy."

"It's not the car. Your body is reacting to the setting sun."

I whipped my head to him. "Say what?"

He nodded at the dim light in the east. "The setting sun warns when the wolf inside you is about to rise."

A rush of heat swelled over me and I squirmed in my seat. "Wolf? What the hell are you talking about?" I questioned him.

"There is a feral beast inside you that you can't control. It knows this and manifests itself every evening," he explained.

"Bullshit. It's just you giving me drugs." My eyes widened and I glanced down at the water bottle. I snatched it and clenched it in my hand. "You asshole! You son of a bitch! You put something in this, didn't you?"

"Something that affects you but not me?" he countered.

"You've got an immunity or something to it." I threw the water bottle onto the floor at his feet and grabbed my door handle. I pulled it back, but it wouldn't budge. I looked over my shoulder and scowled at Shadow. "Unlock the door!"

"You feel a sensation of heat, don't you?"

"Yeah, because you spiked the drink, now open the door!"

"But that's not the only sensation. You feel like something's inside you clawing its way out. Something primitive and wild, something you can't control," he mused.

I ground my teeth together. The heat inside me rose to a fevered pitch. I felt my sweat-soaked, dirt-stained shirt stretch as my breasts swelled. My hands flexed in front of me and lengthened into claws. I panted for air. My muscles tensed and stretched, tearing open my pants. When I spoke my voice was deep and had a growling tremble to it.

"Let me out!" I demanded.

"No."

I wasn't in the mood for that word. I snarled and dove at him. My seat belt jerked me back against my seat, and I clawed at the clasp to get it open and get my hands on his throat. Shadow swiftly knelt down and snatched the water bottle from his feet. He unscrewed the lid and threw the contents in my face.

The ice-cold water washed over me like a wet towel. It dampened whatever was inside me and brought me back to sanity. Water dripped from my hair as I blinked at him. My chest heaved up and down and I grasped the sides of the chair, but I was my self again.

I ran a hand through my wet hair and scrunched my eyes shut. My whispered voice was hoarse and tense. "What the hell is that?"

"I told you. The wolf," he reminded me.

I opened my eyes and turned to him. He avoided my eyes. "It. . .it really isn't drugs, is it?"

He shook his head. "No."

"Then what the hell is wrong with me?"

"You are now a werewolf, and I'm to blame."

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CHAPTER 17

I couldn't believe I was hearing this bullshit from anybody, and he honestly looked like he wanted me to believe it. Shadow's face certainly showed me he believed it.

"Seriously? That's the best piece-of-crap reason you can give me? That all this trouble I've been having with this heat in my body, it's all because I'm a werewolf?" I questioned him.

"It's unbelievable, I know, but it's true. You're now a werewolf," he insisted.

"Stop the car."

"I won't. Not until you believe me."

"I said stop the car!" I reached over and grabbed the wheel. I tried to turn it, but he held it straight and steady. The thing didn't budge an inch towards me. "Stop the god damn car!"

Shadow slammed on the brakes, yanked the wheel to the right, and the car screeched to a stop by the side of the road. The neighborhood we were in wasn't much to look at. Brick apartment buildings with rusted fire escapes and alleys that invited drug dealers into their shadows.

Shadow shut off the jeep and turned his head to me. His voice was tense with a touch of anger. "Why do you find it so unbelievable? What in these last few days makes you doubt what I say?"

"Because what you're saying is nuts," I argued. "Werewolves? Really? Maybe in a bad horror movie, but this is reality. They don't exist, so I can't be one."

"But they do, and you are. I bit you, and that makes you a werewolf," he insisted.

"No, that makes me in the hospital for a few days with the worst hickey in the world," I quipped. "There's nothing werewolfy about a guy biting a girl on the neck. Just sick."

"What about how fast it healed?" he argued. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. I didn't have an explanation for that. "What about your transformation? Look at yourself."

I glanced down at my torn jeans and swollen breasts. "Just. . .just drugs. The ones you've been giving me," I countered.

He shook his head. "I haven't given you anything but a curse,

though I couldn't do any worse with that. You're a werewolf, and the sooner you admit that the sooner we can begin to transition you into a new life."

I cut the air in front of my with my hands. "No. No new life, no werewolves, just facts," I insisted.

"I am giving you facts, but you're taking them as legend. What more do I need to show you to convince you that you are no longer humans?" he questioned me.

I snatched the door handle and pulled. "A miracle, which is something that you and God are gonna have to find without me," I retorted.

Shadow reached over and grabbed my hand. My eyes widened as I watched his fingers lengthen into claws. Fur sprouted from his skin just above the wrist and covered his hand in soft tufts. I felt the muscles ripple and shift, and his grip tightened like a steel vice over my hand.

He yanked my hand off the handle and forced me to turn towards him. His eyes were a stop-light yellow that glowed in the dim light of the setting sun, and his teeth slipped over his lips like a bad denture job. Fur sprouted from his sideburns and his hair grew out until it hit his shoulders where it stopped. His voice was deep, gravelly, and definitely not human.

"Now do you believe me?" he asked me.

I wasn't easy to shake up, but this had me quaking like a suspect about to hear the verdict in his murder trial. I leaned away and tried to yank my hand out of his paw. He pulled me closer and the seat belt cut into my chest. His face was only inches from mine, and his breath blew over me.

"Well?" he growled.

I grimaced and turned my head. "I'll believe you're anything with that breath," I quipped.

Shadow blinked at me for a moment, and then a grin slipped onto his lips. He chuckled and released me. I fell back into my chair and slipped down so my back was against the part of the door below the window. He leaned back and held his hand up in front of him.

"You amaze me," he commented. My eyes widened when I noticed the fur disappeared from his face and his fingers changed back to their normal look. "Some people lose their minds under this much physical and mental strain, but you crack jokes."

I sat up, but kept my back against the door. "I guess it keeps me sane," I commented.

He dropped his hand and turned to me. "After seeing what I can do, do you still think I'm insane?" he wondered.

I pursed my lips and shook my head. "No, but you've got one hell of a hair problem."

Shadow chuckled and started the car. "I suppose that's one optimistic way of looking at it, but unfortunately it's the least of my-our worries right now."

"And what's our biggest worry?" I asked him.

"Getting you safe. The men who kidnapped you learned a great deal about you and might have passed that on to their employer," he pointed out.

I leaned back in my seat and crossed my arms over my chest. It was a pain getting my arms over my huge breasts. "That isn't going to be easy if their employer owns half the city."

"But you forget that I own the other half, and my townhouse is located there," he told me.

I frowned. "Why are you going to all this trouble for me, anyway? Aren't I just a chewy snack that your teeth didn't finish off?"

His smile fell off his face and he shook his head. "No, you're my responsibility. I never wanted to get you involved, but I couldn't just stand there and watch you bleed to death in that alley."

I raised an eyebrow. "How involved am I?"

"To use your own police terms, you're part of the investigation," he replied.

I snorted. "That I guessed, and that reminds me. What was going on in that alley that night between you and those guys? I heard you mention that moonstone that doc owns and the other guy not wanting to fork it over."

Shadow pursed his lips. "That is the source of all these problems. The moonstone is-"

I held up a hand. "Some magical item that turns people into werewolves. I know. A friend told me."

He raised an eyebrow. "Who's this friend of yours?"

"I don't reveal my sources, but my friend said a lot of people were looking for that moonstone," I told him.

"And did your friend mention who those people were?" he asked me.

"The two guys you dropped in the river, and some other higher-ups he wouldn't give names to. Speaking of that river, you really need to do a better job hiding your furry tracks. I spotted them a mile away," I commented.

His eyebrows crashed down over his eyes. "Where did you find these tracks?"

I straightened. "Where the bodies were found," I told him. I noticed his eyes narrowed. "That isn't where you dumped the bodies, is it?" I guessed.

"No. I dumped them a mile further upstream, and I didn't visit where the police pulled them out," he revealed.

"So what I saw was what? The competition?" I guessed.

"I would guess that's who it was," he agreed.

"I thought you said these guys were good at being shadows," I reminded him.

"They are. That's why I would further guess that's how they found you. They left those tracks for a werewolf to follow, and they followed you in return," he surmised.

I growled and slammed my fist against the dashboard. "Damn it! It was a trap and I. . .I-" I pulled back my hand and saw I'd left a dent the shape of my hand. "Holy shit. . ." I muttered.

"It's generally considered a curse, but 'holy shit' can describe being a werewolf," he told me.

I raised my hand in front of my face and flexed my fingers. They looked normal. "I don't feel any different," I pointed out.

"No, but you shouldn't. Your new body is fitted to you. It's an evolutionary asset not to stumble over your new muscles and-" his eyes flickered to my breasts, "-assets."

I wrapped my arms over my chest and narrowed my eyes. "Watch it, boy. I've punched a guy for less."

"I don't doubt it," he replied. His eyes looked away from me and back to the road. The streets had less trash and more traffic. We passed new apartment buildings and luxury condos. "You now have superhuman strength, senses, and speed, and the aging process has slowed."

I brushed my hand over the dent. "No aging? That wasn't in any of the fairy tales," I quipped.

He chuckled. "No, it's mostly attributed to vampires, but werewolves are also long-lived."

"How old are we talking about?" I asked him.

"Quite old." He turned off onto a side street and the buildings changed.

We were on streets that showed off shiny old townhouses. They were the narrow kind with four stories and a rental bill that would've drained my salary dry. Even the lit streetlights looked down on me as we passed by them. There was also a lot of hills. You couldn't see down any of the blocks because hills blocked the view.

"We're almost to my house. I hope you don't mind a change of atmosphere," he told me.

"You mean from depressing to snobby? I can live with that, but on my terms," I warned him. I looked out the window and watched the tall houses fly by. The last rays of the sun were disappearing behind the horizon of tall buildings. "So werewolves live in these things like normal people?"

"Yes, but what's this about your terms?" he asked me.

I turned to face him. "I play by my rules, and that means if I want to leave, I leave."

He pursed his lips. "That wouldn't be a good idea."

"Maybe not, but it's one I'm going to follow," I returned.

"We'll see what to do when we arrive," he countered.

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CHAPTER 18

Shadow parked the car a half a block down and shut off the engine. He leaned into my seat and nodded out my window. "There she is. Home."

I looked at the building. It was a brick townhouse with four floors, a basement, and enough age to call me 'kid.' The floors were thirty feet across and a short stoop led up to the first floor. The siding color was white, the roof red, and the normalness of the place off the scales.

Shadow got out of the car and I followed him up the stoop. He unlocked the door, swung it open, and stepped to the side. "Ladies first," he offered. I crossed my arms and planted my feet. He shrugged and walked inside first.

I stepped inside and had to admit it was a nice pad. Real wood floors, paneled walls, modern furniture with enough sharp angles to make a politician jealous, and a smell that screamed 'housekeeper.' Shadow closed the door behind me and gestured to the stairs in front of the door.

"Let me show you to your room," he suggested.

I shrugged. "If you want, but I don't plan on making this a long visit."

He led me up the stairs, then up another flight of stairs. We stopped on the third floor. The whole floor was one large bedroom. The only privacy from the stairs was a thin dividing wall with a door. The bedroom had a bed that would've fit an elephant. A table and chairs sat in the middle of the room. There was a closet at the back near the bed, and the front was lit by the exterior wall that looked out on the street. Thin curtains blocked out some of the view.

"I hope you like it. My bedroom's just above yours if you need me," he told me

"Not bad," I commented as I strolled over to the table that stood in the center of the room.

Shadow walked over to the closet. He slid open the door and revealed a row of clothes. "I thought you would be coming here and prepared a few clothes for you."

"Wanting to get me into some clothes so you can rip them off

me?" I quipped.

He smiled. "Something like that." He walked to the front, street-facing wall. "Let me show you the best part," he requested. He flung aside the curtains and I saw there was a balcony outside the windows.

Now here was something I could use. An escape. I walked over and peeked out the open door that led onto the balcony. The drop over the railing was a good thirty feet. I had a view over the crest of the hill to the right and saw the street took a nose-dive towards the inner part of the residential area. "The view isn't as comparable to your alley and brick wall, but I hope you'll come to like it."

I turned away from the balcony. "I keep telling you I'm not staying here, and you won't find it very easy keeping me here if you try," I warned him.

Shadow shut the curtains. "I won't keep you a prisoner, but I must really ask that you to stay here for tonight. You endanger both of us with your reckless need for independence. Besides, no one will believe anything you tell them."

I narrowed my eyes. "Why not? There's two carcasses baking in that oven by the river that say I'm telling the truth."

He shook his head. "My men will have cleaned up the mess before the officials arrive. That, and any fingerprints and tire tracks." He leaned against the frame of the door and crossed his arms over his chest. There was a smug smile on his face that grated on my nerves. "So you see you won't be believed. Staying here is your best option."

I felt a heat boil up inside me like a hot teakettle. "Like hell I'm staying here! You can shove your werewolf bullshit and stupid gang conspiracy theories up where the sun doesn't shine and leave me out of this."

I stalked towards the door, but Shadow headed me off. He raised his arms on either side of him and blocked the door. "You have to see you're not yourself. Without some self control the wolf will control you after the sun sets." I growled and lunged at him with my hands held out like claws. Shadow grabbed my wrists and kept me from clawing off his face. "Do you believe this is you?"

"Get out of my way!" I snarled.

"No!" He pulled me to the back of the room and threw me onto the bed.

I landed with a bounce on the covers, but quickly crawled onto

my hands and knees. I turned around and snarled at him. He curled his lips back and growled. I paced the bed from one side to the other and narrowed my eyes. Shadow tore off his shirt and showed off his growing fur as he transformed into a beast. I growled and jumped at him, but he grabbed my arms and wrestled me to the covers. He sat on top of me and pinned my arms to the bed.

"Stop fighting me! You will only bring out the wolf in us!" he growled.

"Let me go!" I snapped.

Shadow tilted his head back and snarled. His hair grew down past his shoulders. His pants tore open, and his muscles stretched and rippled. He leaned down and captured my lips in a passionate kiss. His touch was like throwing gas on the fire inside me. The heat flared up and consumed what little senses I had were swept away in the flames of my lust and his passion.

What remained of my pants and shirt were torn to shreds by Shadow's claws. He pressed his naked body against mine and his hands touched and stroked me, stoking the fire that raged inside me. I groaned and arched into his touch. What he did to me, what power he had over me, was pure bliss and absolute torture. I longed for him to take me and yet dreaded its end, but my one solace was that night would return and we would perform the dance again.

I allowed myself to sink into the abyss of lust and longing. Our bodies gyrated against each other, teasing each other with sweet, sensual promises that would fulfill the ache deep inside us. I felt something claw inside me, the wolf he spoke of, and I gladly gave it full rein. The creature swelled up inside me and changed me both physically and mentally. My body tensed and morphed. Fur sprouted from my hot flesh and my hands lengthened into claws. My breasts swelled and my lust firmed them. Muscle replaced fat, hip bones widened, and my feet stretched into long paws.

The changes inside me gave rise to a delicious pleasure that demanded attention. His attention. I leaned my head back and groaned. My body needed him inside me. Nothing less would do. My mate growled and thrust hard and deep into my hot, aching core. I groaned as he stretched and fitted to my soaked walls. He grunted and pushed deeper, burying himself in me. We were almost as one; one body, one soul, one purpose. That purpose was to satisfy the lust inside us, to appease the wolf with sweet, sensual torture.

He pulled out and pushed back in. His stroke was long and smooth, and it pressed against my sensitive clit. I shuddered and clutched his arms. It felt so good to be at the mercy of another, to have his full weight on top of me and inside me. He made me whole and had full mastery of my mind and senses. There was only him. Nothing else in the world mattered, or even existed.

He continued his teasing thrusts and pulls, but they were too gentle, too slow. I needed more. I'd waited too long this night for a slow, sensitive touch. What I needed was a hard taking, a domineering that would make me ache for him long after the night was over.

"Faster," I growled.

He growled and pressed himself closer to me. "Patience, my pet," he whispered.

I whimpered and squirmed. "Please." I would have offered my soul for a faster stroke.

He went a little faster, but it wasn't enough. I thirsted for a wild abandonment. A feral rut that would leave me shivering for more. I wrapped my legs around his waist which allowed him to slip deeper into me. His eyes widened and he grunted. His self-control slipped and he thrust hard and quick into me. We both panted for breath. Our sweat-soaked bodies slid against each other in time with our lust.

My body trembled with the vibrations of pleasure. Each penetration brought me closer to bliss, and all because of him. I was his, all his. Only he could call forth such aching desire as what I felt then. Only he could bring out the animal inside me and tame it to his animal needs. Only him, and oh god, did I need him.

"Mine!" he growled.

"Yes! Yours!" I cried out.

All reason flew out the window. He thrust deeper and harder into me. I could only hold on as his wild penetrations stroked me faster and faster. The bed rocked with our violent passions. The rippling wave of pleasure turned into a tidal wave that consumed me. My body convulsed with an orgasm that drowned out all other senses but touch. I knew only his touch, his thrusts, and I wanted to know nothing else.

Unfortunately, the rest of the world intruded on our bliss. A car horn honked in the distance. Somebody yelled at someone across the street. The spell was broken.

Shadow slid out of me and stood. I rolled over and looked at him. This was the first time I wasn't so exhausted that I couldn't keep my eyes open. Now my eyes took a look at this guy who couldn't keep his paws off me, and I started back. His was well-muscled, but the fur hid most of his skin. He stood a head taller than me with a thin face that wasn't too narrow. His butt was really nice, too.

He glanced over his shoulder at me and I saw his eyes were tinged with yellow. "You will stay here," he growled.

I glared at him. I didn't care how good he was at sex. I wasn't going to be a good doggy and sit. "Try and make me," I challenged him.

Shadow turned away from me and snatched the remains of his clothes from the floor. He walked out the door and shut it firmly behind him. My eyes widened when I heard a distinct click of a lock. I jumped off the bed and ran naked to the door. One test of the knob was enough to tell me he wasn't taking my 'no' for an answer.

I slammed my shoulder against the door. What I got for my trouble was a sore shoulder and an immovable door. The damn thing didn't even quiver, much less budge.

I turned around and leaned my back and head against the door. "Damn it. . ."

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CHAPTER 19

Here I was trapped in a bedroom in the house of a werewolf guy who was giving me more sex than information. What I wanted right then was some more info, and a good ladder. My eyes fell on the balcony. I threw on some sheets and walked out on the high-rise view. The ground was just as far down as before, but now I cared less because it was my best chance at getting out of there. The streetlights were on and showed me there wasn't much foot traffic. That was good. I didn't want any witnesses Shadow could interrogate.

"Shadow. . ." I murmured. I didn't even have his name, and I bet asking nice wasn't going to get it out of him.

I'd have time to find that out later. Right then I had to find out how to get down. There was always the choice to jump, but I wasn't desperate or stupid enough to accept I was some super-wolf human and I could make a drop like that without breaking some bones. There was also the option of screaming for help, but this Juliet wouldn't have found her Romeo on an empty street.

I leaned over the railing and the blanket flapped in the wind. That gave me an idea. It was old-fashioned, but so was I. I ran back inside, threw on some clothes from the closet, and tossed the blankets onto the balcony.

I don't know how he heard that rustling. Probably his wolf hearing. Whatever it was I was just tying the first two sheets together when I heard the door unlock. It swung open and Shadow swept into the room like a hurricane. It took him a few seconds to figure out what I was up to, and from his narrowed eyes I got the feeling he wasn't going to be complimenting my ingenuity.

Shadow marched onto the balcony and tore the sheets from my hands.

"You will not leave!" he growled.

"Not that way," I quipped.

I was now desperate enough to do something incredibly stupid. I swung myself over the railing and dropped down the two floors to the hard sidewalk below. I'd taken some long, tough falls in my time, but this was definitely the worst. I tucked my legs in and did a tumble along the sidewalk. My head and feet complained, but when

I stopped rolling I was intact and sat on my butt. I jerked my head up and saw Shadow glaring at me. He flung himself over the railing.

I didn't stick around to score his landing. I scrambled to my feet and took off down the road. A soft, heavy pair of feet followed me, and I didn't need a detective's badge to know it was him. He trailed me like his namesake. By the time I was halfway down the block he'd shortened the distance between us by half. Another half and I'd have two shadows right behind me.

By the stupidest luck I was saved by one of my own. A police car drove up the road and I practically jumped on his hood. The officer slammed on his brakes and leaned out the window.

"What the hell's going on?" he shouted at me.

I slid off the hood and stumbled over to his door. My hands clutched his open window and I tried not to choke on my gasping words. "You. . .you gotta. . .help me-" I looked up the block and saw no one was there.

"Listen, lady, I'm going to have to ask you to step away from the car," the officer requested.

I returned my attention to the car and tightly gripped the door. "My name's Detective Marie Selena. I've just escaped from a madman who thinks he's a werewolf and tried to keep me prisoner," I told him.

The officer took off his hat and waved it in front of him like a fan. "Lady, whatever your name is it's too hot for some cock-and-bull story like that. How about I take you down to the precinct and we can check out your story in some air conditioning?"

I frowned and pointed up the street. "But his apartment is just up there! We could catch-" I heard a motor start at the end of the street and car tires grind against the pavement as they pulled a sharp u-turn away from our direction. Too late.

"Are you sure you're all right?" the officer asked me.

I ran a hand through my hair and ground my teeth together as I shut my eyes. "No, I am not all right," I growled. My eyes snapped open and the officer started back. I gripped his window and leaned inside the car. "I've just been kidnapped, rescued, kidnapped again, and held prisoner by a psychopath that-" I caught myself in the reflection of the man's wide eyes. I was changed. Fur had sprouted from my face and my eyes were a bright, illuminated yellow.

I let go of the door and stumbled back. Both the officer and I glanced at where my hands had been. There were deep indents in

the metal with clear outlines of my fingers. The officer's eyes got bigger and he rolled up the window, or tried to. The twisted, squished metal scratched the glass, but the man's perseverance egged on by fear meant he didn't stop trying until that glass was between me and him.

"G-get the hell away from me!" he shrieked.

I didn't have a choice. The guy stepped on the pedal like he was in Grand Theft Auto and burned through half his tires before he sped off down the road. He went from zero to sixty in ten seconds, and over the hill of the street in half that time.

I was left in the middle of the road with the streetlights shining down on me and no one in sight. I raised my hands and looked down at them. Paws. That's all I saw. My hands were fur-covered, claw-tipped paws. Wolf paws, but with a tinge of the narrow human fingers just to mock me. I was so fucked.

My legs buckled and I fell on my knees onto the ground. I tried hard to keep back those stupid tears, but they just kept coming. My hands shook. I balled them into fists and pressed them against my chest. My heart beat loud and clear, but not fast. I wasn't afraid, just-well, just angry. Angry at Shadow, angry at myself for getting mixed up in this, angry at that other officer because he was too damn afraid to do his duty.

My eyes widened and I whipped my head up. Duty. I knew a guy who would do his duty to protect me even if he found out I was an alien. All I needed to do was remember his address from the files and figure out where it was from here.

I stood up and shut my eyes.

"Come on, Marie, think! Where the hell is he?" I growled. Even my voice was changed. It was deep and gravely.

My eyes shot open. Gravel! Gravel Street! That was where he lived!

I opened my eyes, and turned my head left and right. If this was the top of Snob Nob Hill then I knew exactly where to go. Down.

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CHAPTER 20

It took me an hour to get to Gravel Street. I still had on my wolf suit and didn't know how to take it off. My tutorial with Shadow hadn't gotten that far before I decided to ditch his tutoring. I slipped in and out of alleys and avoided people and cars. What I couldn't avoid was every damn dog in the city. It was like everybody had stocked their yard with dogs just so they could bark and snarl at me, and did they snarl. It was like I was a cat at a dog show, and all the dogs were rabid. Every fence was a barrier to a horrible mauling and every gate was an exit the dogs desperately tried to get through to get at me.

The funny thing was every bark echoed in my eardrums like they were shouted through a bullhorn. Every screech of some poorly-oiled car brakes and every groan of a fence gate grated on my ears. I was delayed in my journey because I had to keep clamping my hands over my damn ears.

I slunk along like an amateur burglar until I hit Gravel Street. The house I wanted was number eleven. That was down the block. I reached the well-manicured lawn and crept into the fence-less and dog-less yard. The back door had a light over it. Through the lit windows I could see my target washing some dishes.

Officer Baldwin was as exact in his house as he was in his duties. I made it to the door and knocked. Every sound inside was as clear as if I was inside seeing them. A dish was dropped into soapy water. Footsteps approached the door, but paused. Somebody rubbed against cloth. I didn't have to guess it was a gun. The door was unlocked and opened a crack. I saw his eye peek through at me huddled as I was on his stoop.

"Who is it?" Baldwin questioned me.

"It's me, Marie Selena," I whispered.

His eye widened. "Detective Selena? What the hell happened to you? Where have you been?"

"Mind interrogating me inside?" I pleaded.

"Oh, yes, of course." He stepped back and the door swung open. Baldwin stepped aside and looked me over as I entered. "Why are you in that werewolf costume?"

"It's a new fashion I'm trying out," I quipped as I peeked out

the window. Nothing moved in the backyard. "But what's been going on today? Any news about that double-murder?"

"No, but the Chief's been worried sick about you all day," Baldwin told me as he offered me as he plopped himself in a chair at a small table. "He tried to call your phone a half dozen times before he told me to look in on you. When I didn't find you he sent out an APB for all the precincts to be on the lookout for you."

I snorted. "Some of the officers didn't get the memo." I looked around the kitchen. It was small, but nice. A small table and white cabinets, and everything in its place. "But I need you to do me a couple of big favors."

"Anything, but after I call the station. They'll want to know you're okay," Baldwin insisted. He pulled out his cell phone, but I grabbed his hand.

"That's one of the favors I need you to do for me. I need to stay here for a day or two, and I don't want anyone to know I'm here," I told him.

Baldwin frowned. "But the Chief needs to know you're okay so we can rescind the APB."

I shook my head. "That's not a good idea right now. I don't know if anyone's after me and I'd rather not find out on their terms."

"Who would be after you?" he questioned me.

I dropped my hand and leaned back in my chair. "You ever heard of a gang called Garu?"

Baldwin shook his head. "No, why?"

"Because I think they're one of the gangs that's after me," I told me.

"One? You've got more?" he guessed

I nodded. "Yeah. There's this other one headed by a guy named Shadow. He's the owner of-"

Baldwin held up his hand. "Wait a sec. Shadow?"

I glared at him. "Yeah, Shadow. That's the only name I've gotten out of him."

My fellow officer gave me a look that told me he thought I'd been hanging around too long in the narcotics division. "You sure you don't want me to call the Chief?"

I leaned forward over the table and leaned one of my arms across the top. "Yeah, I'm sure, and I'm also sure I'm not crazy," I insisted. "A pair of these Garu guys kidnapped me earlier today and

I got snatched from them by Shadow. He's been stalking me since this whole mess in the alley came up, and I want to know what went down that night. Now are you going to hide me out so I can figure that out or do I have to go someplace else?" I half stood, but he put his hands on my shoulders and stopped me.

His voice was low and firm. "All right, I'll help, but you have to promise to keep me informed about anything that can be used in the murder investigation-"

"Fair enough," I agreed.

"-and you have to tell the Chief you're okay," he finished.

"That's not okay," I argued.

Baldwin set me back in my chair and took a seat in the one closest to me. He looked me steady in the eyes. "You can use a phone at a house I know about. Even if they trace your call they won't find you there and it won't be traced back to me," he assured me.

I sighed, but nodded. "Fine. Where is this place?"

He stood. "I'll take you there tomorrow."

"I'd rather go there tonight," I requested.

His eyes swept over me. "It's dark out there, but not that dark. You might be seen in that dog outfit of yours."

"And the sun being up isn't going to help. That's why it needs to be done tonight," I insisted.

"Can't you just take it off?" he suggested.

I held up my hand. The claws and fur were still there. I dropped my hand and shook my head. "No dice. This stuff's not easy to get off."

Baldwin pursed his lips, but nodded his head. "All right, but the Chief's not going to be there."

"I'll ask to speak with Randy. He'll know my voice and can pass on the message," I told him.

"All right. I'll take you there," Baldwin agreed.

His house had a garage attachment, so we got in and backed out. Baldwin drove us down a few blocks. He never looked at me, but his tight lips told me he was thinking about something.

"What were you going to say back there? About that Shadow guy?" he spoke up.

I raised an eyebrow. "Are you really going to believe me if I tell you?"

"I will," he promised.

I slid down in my seat and sighed. "He's the owner of the Wolf's Den."

Baldwin's eyes widened. "Isn't that the place where-"

"I got hurt bad? Yeah. He's been following me ever since, and there's something about a moonstone, but I haven't figure out that angle yet," I commented. It felt good to finally get this stuff off my chest, even if I still had doubts that he actually believed me.

"You told the Chief any of this?" he asked me.

I shook my head. "Nope. He doesn't want to hear it, so I'll level it all to him when I've got proof."

"What have you got right now?" he wondered.

"A guy named Shadow, a gang name, and a stupid stone," I mused.

"Not much to go on."

"Nothing to lead to a conviction, but I'm working on it," I replied.

"So what are you going to tell Randy tonight?" he asked me.

I shrugged. "This is your show. I'll tell him to tell the Chief I'm okay, but anything else and they'll think I'm crazy like you do."

"I don't think-"

"Come on, Baldwin," I scolded him as I sat up. The dark streets flashed by and the glare from the streetlights sped across our faces. "You and I both know I still sound nuts, and you don't even know half of what I know. If I told you that you'd probably lock me up in a cell tonight and toss the key at a psychiatrist on the way to your shift."

He raised an eyebrow. "Nothing can be that unbelievable."

"My story is, and I'd rather stick to silence on some of the juicier details," I insisted.

He shrugged and turned us onto a side street. "All right, but you remember what I said about the case."

"I pretty much just told you the major connection. Shadow's the owner of the night club and there's something going on there with a moonstone," I repeated.

We were on a dark street. Half the streetlights were burned out and the other half were broken. The lawns needed their weeds mowed and the only way some of those shacks were held together was through all the pigeon crap. Baldwin parked us in front of one of the rundown joints and shut off the car.

He leaned forward and nodded past me at the house.

"This is it."

I followed his eyes and frowned. The place was a dark, single-floor home with a roof that sagged. I turned back to him and jerked my head in the direction of the wreck.

"What's so special about this place?" I asked him.

"It doesn't look like it, but the power's still connected and there's a phone land line inside," he explained.

"Why?" I persisted.

He shrugged. "The city's not that fast at disconnecting former drug houses."

"You got a key or we have to break in?" I wondered.

"The back door is unlocked. I'll show you," he offered.

We both got out of the car and walked through the tall weeds to the back of the shabby house. The back door was shut and I noticed it wasn't as rundown as the rest of the house. Baldwin led me inside into a kitchen. There was a broken table with a chair nearby. Some brown stains on the dusty floor added to the rusty decay.

I tried the light switch. Dead.

"The bulb's gone, but there's the phone," Baldwin told me as he pointed at a phone on the wall near the door.

I picked up the receiver and pressed it against my ear. There was a problem. I pulled it away and glared at him. "This doesn't work. There's no dial tone. You sure-" I froze. Baldwin's face was stretched into a hideous grin and his eyes had a strange transparent color to them. It was like looking at the eyes of a dead fish, and I smelled something rotten.

"I know it doesn't work. The electricity was cut several years ago," he revealed.

"Then why did you bring me here?" I questioned him.

He took a step towards me. "This is where you're going to tell me everything you know about the moonstone," he insisted.

I dropped the phone and it swung on its cord as I stepped back. That yellow eye shadow of his wasn't fake. "You're a werewolf," I guessed.

Baldwin chuckled. "A good deduction, detective, but a little off the mark. I am called a ghoul, a creature who feeds off the flesh of humans."

I stopped and frowned. "You're shitting me, right?" I quipped.

He grinned and reached out for me. "No, and in a few minutes,

when I am through with you, I will be eating you."

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CHAPTER 21

I backed up and held up my hands. "Come on, Baldwin, you know you don't want to do this."

He chuckled and matched me step-for-step. "But I do. Werewolves are a little furry in my mouth, but they have a toughness in them that I admire. I think of it as a challenge to slay one."

I would have rather not thought of it at all. "This is insane. We've known each other for years. Why eat me now?"

"It's all because of what you know about the moonstone," he revealed. "And if I don't think you're telling me everything you know about it then I'm afraid I'm going to have to make your death all that much more painful."

I reached the end of the small kitchen and my back knocked against the wall. My palms pressed against the wall and I narrowed my eyes at him. "What do you want with the moonstone?"

He shook his head. "I want nothing to do with it, but my employer is very eager to get a hold of it."

"And who's he?" I questioned him.

"I'm the one who asks the questions here, and you're going to answer them like a good dog," Baldwin ordered me.

He stretched out his hand towards my neck. Something inside of me snapped. It was my muscles. I instinctively pressed myself against the wall and pushed off the crumbling wallpaper. My feet sprang from the cracked tile floor and I sailed over Baldwin. I landed with a heavy thud on the top of the fridge. One of the legs must have been shorter than the others because the whole thing rocked back and forth when I hit its top. It was a good thing the fridge was one of those old fat ones because I slid across its smooth, dusty surface and crashed head-first into the wall.

I flailed around for a little while to get my bearings and ended up on my back with my head tilted back so I faced Baldwin. He was pretty ticked at me. His mouth was a thin line that no drunk could've walked across and his eyes were narrowed.

"What?" I asked him. "Never seen a werewolf jump?"

"I seem to have underestimated the extent of your adeptness with your abilities," he mused as he strode over to me. "That won't

happen again."

I righted myself so I was on all fours on the top of the fridge. The old thing swayed and rocked, and I had to cling to the sides to keep from losing my balance. Some mental nerve inside me was on autopilot and did all the balancing for me. That left the escape plan to my conscious self. I looked past Baldwin at the doorway that led into the rest of the house.

"I hate reruns as much as the next guy, but I'm going to have to disappoint both of us," I quipped.

I pushed off from the fridge and sailed through the air towards the door. Baldwin was one step ahead of me and leapt up. He grabbed my ankle and jerked down. I slammed chest-first into the floor and left a dent an inch thick in the linoleum. The wind was knocked from my lungs and I saw badges swirling around my head. I climbed onto my knees and hands, but Baldwin grabbed the back of my collar and lifted me off the floor. He turned me around and shoved my face into his, and his wasn't pretty anymore.

His eyes were still transparent with a bluish tinge to them, and now his face was as white as a body sheet. The look in his eyes told me he still intended for me to be in one of those soon, if there was enough of me to garner a bag. He grinned and his mouth stretched open from ear-to-ear. He could've fit a whole dozen donuts in there and had room for the baker's treat, but that mouth wasn't made for wheat products. There were two rows of sharp, pointy teeth that glistened in the weak light.

"Nice moves, but not nice enough," he growled.

"Then try this one," I snapped. I swung my fist and it connected with his left cheek.

His head jerked to the side and there was a terrible snap as the neck bones went beyond what the human body was capable of. He lost his hold on me, and I dropped to the floor and scrambled backwards on my hands and butt. Baldwin stumbled back and his arms flailed out in front of him. His back hit the door of the fridge, and he reached up and grabbed his head in both hands. I grimaced when he snapped his head back in place and blinked.

His eyes fell on me and his big mouth snarled down at me. "You're going to pay for that one," he growled as he strode towards me. "I'm going to-"

I decided I didn't want to know what he had in mind, so I kicked my leg up when he stepped within range. My foot connected

with his groin. Apparently even ghouls had balls because he clutched his family jewels. His eyes bulged out of his head. He stumbled back and fell onto his knees. A small, high-pitched whimper whistled through his sharp teeth.

I took that as my cue to make a quick escape. I scrambled to my feet and shot past my old coworker and the fridge, and out the door. The night gave me some cover from staring eyes, but I didn't have much faith that it'd keep me from getting chomped by my former friend. I wasn't all that familiar with the abilities of ghouls and I wasn't really keen on learning them. What I was keen on doing was finding some place, or somebody, I could trust, or at least a place where I could sit for a night.

I sprinted down a nearby alley and out of sight of the drug house. My mind was giving me a couple of options, and I didn't like any of them. One was to turn myself in to the Chief and tell him the whole truth. I had enough furry evidence on me to get a skeptic to believe me. Unfortunately, I was also covered in enough evidence to get me committed to a science lab for dissecting and study. That wasn't happening, so I ruled out that option.

The only other plan I could think of was to go back to the Rusty Knife and pump the owner of info about Quinn. Namely where I could find him and who'd set me up the last time I tried to pay him a visit. Maybe I'd take care of both problems when I pumped the bar owner for details.

I wound my way through the streets and snatched a blood-red bed sheet off a backyard clothesline. It worked pretty well as a cloak with a hood. If I stumbled into someone I wouldn't be dealing with a lot of screaming.

I arrived on the street of the Rusty Knife at just past midnight. The witching hour. Baldwin's transformation into a grinning, murderous clown with a taste for human flesh made me wonder if witches weren't crawling the streets, too. I slid behind a nearby mail drop box, the kind that could have hid a whole gang of werewolves. I peeked over the top and surveyed the area. Nothing moved except a flickering streetlight down the street. If I survived this mess I'd complain to the city about that light. I picked up a couple of broken bits of sidewalk and looked over all the streetlights across the road. I'd leave out this part in my complaint.

"Don't fail me now, paws," I whispered.

I stood and chucked the bits of sidewalk at the lights. My aim

was true, or my luck was a whole bunch of stupid. Every single one of my targets went dark followed by the tinkle of glass hitting the sidewalk and road. In a few moments I had my darkened street. The way was clear for me to take the door of the bar.

I snuck across the dark road and stretched out against the front wall of the bar. The shaded windows were weakly lit by the lights from inside the bar. I tried to get a glimpse around them, but it was useless. I went for the handle of the closed door, and it was unlocked. I quietly opened the door and peeked my head inside. The bar was as inconspicuous as the last time I entered, but I knew how that ended.

I slipped inside and stuck to the wall. There wasn't a patron to be seen, but I saw the usual bartender-owner of the Rusty Knife behind the bar. Bill was his name, and he had a rag in one hand and a glass in the other. The bar was recessed into the wall so that I was able to slide underneath the lip of the bar between the fake wood paneling and the stools. I took a deep breath and swung myself up and over the top of the bar. I grabbed the bartender by the neck and shoved our faces together. The rag and glass dropped onto the bar. The hood of my sheet fell back and showed off my fur, but I didn't have time to worry about my looks.

Bill's eyes widened. "Jesus!"

"He's got nothing to do with either of us," I quipped.

Bill furrowed his brow. "Detective Selena?"

"In the flesh, but that's not important right now," I replied. "What the hell happened last time I was here?"

He glared back at me. "That's what I'd like to know."

I frowned. "So you don't know who the two goons in here were?"

He shook his head. "No, but if I ever see them again I'm gonna kill them. They owe me a shitload of of money for renting out this place and scaring off Quinn." I studied his face and for the first time he studied mine. "What the hell happened to you, anyway?" he asked me.

I dropped him so his feet were again on the floor and shook my head as I took a seat on the stools. "It's a long story, but I can tell you that those guys aren't going to be bothering you again and they definitely aren't going to be paying their bill."

Bill sighed and shook his head. "Just my luck. Anyway, what do you have to do with them? Need them to shave your face?"

"Really funny," I growled. "Let's just say they roughed me up worse than they did your place. What was the story they told you to get you out of here?"

He shrugged, then grabbed the rag and proceeded to wipe down the bar. "Just that they wanted to rent the place for a little while. I figured it wasn't any big deal because Quinn wasn't here and he told me not to expect him for a couple of days."

"Damn it. . ." I muttered underneath my breath. Just my luck that my only lead would go AWOL.

The bartender stopped his wiping and leaned over the bar. "You looking for Quinn?"

My eyes flickered up to him and I frowned. "Would I be here otherwise?"

Bill leaned back and continued his wiping. "You don't have to be so sore about it. It's not like I have that bad of a selection."

I shook my head and ran my hands through my werewolf hair. "I just really need to find Quinn. We have some unfinished business. He's got something I really need."

He raised an eyebrow. "What kind of something?"

My eyes slid up to him and narrowed. "Not the kind I'm going to tell you about."

"Actually, I might have that something for you." He reached beneath the bar and I readied myself for a gun, sword, or at this point, maybe even a wand. Instead, he pulled out an envelope and held it out to me. "Before Quinn left last time he told me to give this to somebody who was asking for him. He had some info for them. I figure that's you."

I took the envelope and opened the flap. Inside was a small slip of folded paper, and I pulled out the paper and read the contents.

If you want me and what I have then you'd better get down to where this all started. I'll be inside.

It was signed Quinn. My eyes flickered up to the bartender and I held the note out to him.

"Any idea what this means?" I asked him.

He took the paper, read the contents, and shook his head. "No idea," he told me as he passed the note back to me. "You have any idea?"

I shook my head and pocketed the envelope and note. "Nope, but it's the only thing I've got." I slipped off the stool and walked towards the door.

"Hey," Bill called to me. I paused at the door and turned to him. "What's really happening to you? You look like a bearded lady I saw a long time ago at the circus."

I pursed my lips and looked away. "You could say I'm going through a change."

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CHAPTER 22

I slipped out the door and out onto the dark street. In my pocket was a mystery and on my body was the evidence of my freakish curse. I held up my hands and frowned. They were long, pointed, and harrier than any trucker I'd arrested.

"You've got to get this under control. . ." I murmured to myself.

That was easier said than done considering I had no idea how to start.

I sighed and dropped my hands. "Might as well start at the beginning," I told myself.

The beginning meant how I came to get this hairy. Sex, or at least sexy thoughts. I looked around the neighborhood and spotted an alley a couple of buildings down. I hurried to the opening and slipped inside. The alley was a dingy, slimy cesspool of a failing city drainage system complete with overturned garbage cans, standing water that resembled something from a nuclear waste facility plant, and enough rats to overrun a small preschool. It was filthy. It was smelly. It was perfect.

I wasn't a rocket scientist, but I did know about cause and effect. I figured the cause of my hairy consequence was the teenager hormones that Shadow got going inside me. If I wanted to reverse the affects I'd need to do the opposite. That meant go into the vilest cesspool the city had to offer and calm down my teenager hormones. Since city hall was closed at that hour I'd have to make do with an alley.

I took a seat on an overturned garbage can and took a deep breath. The stink of the place was worse than I expected. I choked and slapped my hand over my mouth and nose. The place wreaked like the city morgue after a gang shootout.

"Gang. . ." I muttered.

That brought back memories, like about all that talk about Shadow being some sort of a vigilante keeping another gang at bay. I snorted. He didn't seem like the good-guy type, my rescue aside. He'd only done that so he could keep porking me. Well, our porking days were over. He'd have to find some other girl to satiate that beast inside him. He could take her in his strong arms and press her against his hard, smooth chest. They would lock lips in a passionate

kiss and their bodies would rub against each other. Their lust would to new heights and-

"Damn it," I growled. I held out my hands and saw they were sharper and longer than before.

This wasn't working. I pounded my fists into the parts of the trashcan on either side of me. My hands buried themselves a few inches into the tin can. I frowned and yanked on them. Neither of them pulled out of the indents. I gave a harder tug, but no going. Apparently I had more strength when I was mad than when I wasn't.

That made me mad.

I jumped to my feet and dragged the can behind me. The alley was filled with gray and black colors, but all I saw was red. I charged headlong across the five yards to the opposite alley wall and at the last minute spun around. The garbage can made a satisfying crunch sound as I slammed it between the brick and my back. I pulled away from the wall and my hands slid free. The garbage can dropped to the ground, and I turned and gave it a good kick for measure. The damn thing must have grown some sentience with that collision because it knocked off the wall and flew back at me. It hit me in the head. The world spun around until I dropped to my knees onto the grimy ground. I clutched my head and tried to shake it off. I hadn't felt this bad since I was attacked in that alley by those-

My head snapped up and my eyes widened. My hands fumbled in my pocket and I pulled out the note. I opened the paper and read the message.

"Where this all started. . ." I repeated aloud. I glanced over the dank alley. This whole mess started in an alley.

I stuffed the note in my pocket and stood. I had a club to visit.

Unfortunately, it wasn't easy getting to the Wolf's Den on foot. Every streetlight was my worst enemy and every car a potential underling of that rival gang Shadow told me about. I'd met my quota of kidnapping for my lifetime and didn't want to exceed my limit, or my luck. For once my little fur problem was a blessing. I was a heck of a lot faster than usual and my hearing and nose were stronger than ever. I picked up on every approaching vehicle, chattering teenager, and leaky faucet. Every smell had the potential to be a blessing or a curse.

I reached the Wolf's Den street and pulled my sheet close to

my face. The place was hopping like the double-homicide never happened. That was the way of the big city. Cars drove back and forth blaring their horns. Their drivers gave each other the one-fingered salute and there was a swear in reply. The flashing red lights of the district hurt my eyes. There was a line out the door and near the opening to the infamous alley. That was my target. I slunk across the road and into the dark alley.

I kept against the wall and shuffled along the rough brick until I reached the intersection. The light over the door to my left revealed that the place was empty. I gave a sniff with my powerful new nose. No danger there except for the stink of a garbage dump. I crept up to the door and tried it. Locked. That would've been inconvenient if I didn't have my new-found strength. I grasped the knob and turned it hard. The lock in the knob cracked, but the door didn't swing open like it should have. There was a gap between the door and the frame, and I peeked into it. There was stupid chain on the other side. I tried to reach my fingers through the gap, but it was a no go.

I looked around for a solution to my problem and my eyes fell on nothing. This meant that I'd have to do it the old-fashioned way. I took a step back and slammed my foot into the door. The door flew open and hit the inner wall with a loud bang. I rushed forward and peeked my head inside. There wasn't a sign of anybody, but I didn't expect it to stay that way. I slipped inside and found myself in a rear hallway. The sound of pulsing music came to my sensitive ears, but I didn't have time to complain or write them a noise citation.

The hallway led straight ahead and to the right. I strode ahead towards the bombastic music. The only lights came from some sickly red ones high up on the walls and spaced at intervals of ten feet. The walls and floor were made of concrete and the few doors I saw were heavy and wooden.

I heard a noise ahead of me and jumped towards the nearest door on my left. I slipped inside just as I saw a pair of shadows rush down the hallway towards the back door. Their feet clamored past me and echoed down the passage. I breathed a sigh of relief and leaned my back against the door. That's when I noticed the room in which my I'd found refuge.

The room was about twenty by twenty feet wide and long. There was only a chair and a small wooden table to my left. To my

right and at the back of the room was a cage. The bars reached from the floor to the ceiling, and took up half the room. Inside the space was the worst nightmare an animal control officer could dream of.

The thing behind the bars was a snarling, drooling beast. Everything was covered in fur. Its face was stretched into a snout and had claws, but most of it was human, and male. It had a pair of arms and legs, and wore the tattered remains of street clothes. Its blue eyes stared back at me with interest.

"Who are you?" it croaked out.

"I'm Detective Selena," I replied. I pushed off from the door and carefully stepped towards the creature. "What are you?"

"A slave and prisoner here," the beast growled. It came up and wrapped its hands around the bars. "I'm kept here against my will for the entertainment of the psychopath who owns this joint."

"You mean Shadow?" I guessed.

One of his hairy eyebrows lifted. "You know about him?" the thing asked me.

I nodded. "Unfortunately. So he's the one who put you in here? Why?"

The creature dropped its hands from the bars and looked at its palms. "They force me to go through terrible experiments and, when I can't take it anymore they'll put me in the ring and make me fight to the death."

I stopped two feet from the bars and looked over the creature. "You're a werewolf, aren't you?" I guessed

The creature dropped his hands and nodded. "Yeah, that's what I am. They turned me into this because they're sick fucks." The creature tilted his head to one side and studied me. "You know, it's been a long time since I saw a normal person and it's kind of dark in here. Do you think you could come a little closer?"

I looked at the short distance between me and him, and raised an eyebrow. His claws were nature's way of telling me to stay away. "I'm not as normal as you think I am," I told him.

"You're more normal than those nuts those that keep me here," the creature insisted. He pressed his body against the bars and looked me over. "Please?

I pursed my lips, but took a step forward so I was only a foot from the bars. The creature was so fast that I barely had time to jump back before his arm reached through the bars and his sharp

claws swiped at me. I stumbled out of his reach and his cackle echoed around the concrete room.

"Almost gotcha!" the fiend yelled at me. He gave another eerie, high-pitched cackle that hurt my ears. "You really fell for all that stupid shit, didn't you?

I narrowed my eyes at the creature. "What the hell's wrong with you? I only want to help you."

The werewolf pressed itself against the bars and pawed at me. "You can help me by giving me your arm. I just want a little taste of you. Just a bite," the thing pleaded.

I looked over its twisted face and bright, wild eyes. "You're in here because you're the one who's psychotic, aren't you?" I asked him.

The beast grasped the bars and happily nodded his head. "Yep. They don't like me out because I don't mind the taste of humans." His long tongue flicked out and he licked his lips. "Nothing's tastier than a fried human." I backed up to the door and fumbled for the knob. His face fell and contorted into a snarl. "Where the hell do you think you're going? I'm not done with you."

"Too bad," I replied.

I slipped through the door and out into the red-hued hallway. There wasn't any sign of trouble. I shut the door behind me and leaned my back against the wall opposite the door. I clutched my head in my hands. My hand trembled and my eyes glanced down at my hand by my side. My fingers were still long and claw-like. They looked a lot like the ones that monster inside the cell sported. I wondered if I'd end up like that. Maybe that's all Shadow wanted me for, to be used until it drove me insane.

I dropped my hand and shook my head. Whatever he wanted me for I wasn't going to go quietly, and definitely not without some answers. I proceeded down the hallway on my mission to find my informant, ignoring some side halls to my right and doors on either side of me. I didn't want to know what was behind them. The music grew louder, and for once I was happy to hear people shouting and cursing at each other. After a few turns I reached another door. Beyond that door was the Wolf's Den club.

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CHAPTER 23

The Wolf's Den was one gigantic dance floor with a stage at the far corner of the room. The line outside hadn't been lying The place was as crowded as a free beer night at a bar. People gyrated against each other to the beat of the painfully loud music. Their twisting bodies were like dark shadows on a night with a full moon. The room was lit by flashing strobe lights that hung twenty feet above the floor.

The outer walls of the room were filled with booths. I scanned them for my target and found him in the corner closest to me. Quinn sat alone in the darkest booth. I grasped my sheet tightly in my hand and wound my way through the tightly packed crowd. In a few moments I slipped into the plush seat opposite him.

"Quinn," I whispered.

"Good evening, detective. Trying out a new look?" he asked me.

"What the hell do you mean meeting me here?" I questioned him.

He grinned and shrugged. "I thought you'd be glad to meet at a familiar place," he countered.

I glanced around the room and pursed my lips together. "Anywhere but here. . ." I mumbled.

Quinn leaned forward and cradled his ever-present phone in one hand. "So what took you, anyway?"

"You're not an easy guy to find," I pointed out.

"It's good policy in my business to be hard to find," he countered.

"Not for your clients, and speaking of not being easy to find, did you know anything about that trap back at the bar?" I questioned him.

He frowned and tapped on the screen of his phone. I noticed he scrolled through pictures. They were of the interior of the Rusty Knife and taken at the time of my attack. "I'd heard rumors the place was getting hot, so I got out before I got burned."

"Hot for me?" I guessed.

"It was you they wanted, but they might've been glad to get a hold of me," Quinn admitted.

I raised an eyebrow. "Why you?"

"Let's just say I've had some business with them in the past and they were on the losing side," he replied.

"Speaking of business, what have you got for me?" I asked him.

He rummaged in his worn shirt and pulled out a disk. "This. It's everything I could find on that hair sample you sent me." I reached out for it, but he pulled it back. "First, you give me what I want."

"The location of the moonstone?" I guessed.

He shook his head. "No, my price has changed. What I want is for you to do a little job for me."

I frowned. "What kind of job?"

He pulled out an envelope and slid it over to me. "This kind."

I picked up the envelope and pulled out a couple of pieces of paper with a photo. The black-and-white photo showed a man of about forty with dark hair. He wore a dark suit and was flanked by two rough-looking guys on either side of him. I tossed down the photo.

"Who the hell is this?" I asked him.

"He goes by the name of Night," Quinn told me

I snorted. "Just what I need. Another mystery-man pretending to be darkness."

"This mystery man isn't like Shadow. He wouldn't bother with a detective," Quinn countered.

My eyes narrowed. "How do you know about Shadow? I never told you about him."

He grinned and waved the disk that was still in his hand. "I know a lot about him, but if you want to know more than you'll have to take the case."

I shuffled through the papers. "I don't even know what you want me to do. This is just a bunch of specs for a house."

"Look on the last page. There's a certain something in that house I want," he told me.

I flipped to the last page where there was a sketch of a vial. "Seriously? You want me to get into this guy's house and steal something?"

"No, I want you to ingratiate yourself with the owner and get that vial," he corrected me. "It's kept in his study on one of the shelves."

"That sounds pretty stupid," I commented.

"He's not a man to worry about burglars," Quinn returned.

I nodded the photo of the suit. "And this Night guy's the owner?" I guessed.

"Astute as ever, detective. He's holding a party tomorrow night. It's an invitation-only event, and mine got lost in the mail," he explained.

I snorted. "So did mine."

He grinned and shook his head. "No, you're just the type they would let in, but if you have any trouble at the door you can always find a nice second-floor window to slip through."

I stuffed the paperwork back into the envelope and tossed it at him. "No-go. I'm not ruining the rest of my life just to grab a vial for you. I've got enough problems as it is." I pulled back my sleeve and showed him my hair hand.

Quinn scanned my hand and frowned. "You're going to have to deal with that before the party."

"This isn't some quick-grow hair problem, you asshole," I growled as I covered my hand. I nodded at the disk. "I've got some sort of curse on me and the only solution to my problem is on that disk."

"You'll have to take care of that problem before tomorrow night," he agreed as he stuffed the disk back into his suit. "But you're not getting the info on this disk before I get my-"

I whipped my hand out and snatched his wrist of the hand that held the disk. "Listen, Quinn. I've had a hell of a day and I'm not in the-"

"Watch yourself," he warned me in a low voice. His eyes flickered to his left, and I followed where he looked.

A group of suited men congregated near the front door. They wore dark glasses and scanned the tables and dance floor. Their ears sported small receivers and microphones.

"How are they?" I whispered to Quinn.

"Trouble. Let's move," he ordered me.

He grabbed my wrist and pulled me to my feet. My cloak slipped off my head and a girl nearby turned to me. Her eyes widened and she opened her mouth. The woman's piercing scream drilled into my head. I wanted to knock off her head to knock off that screaming. It wasn't like she was using it.

The woman's stupid screaming caught the attention of the dark men at the door. Their sunglasses-covered eyes fell on us and they

dove into the crowd towards us.

"Come on!" Quinn yelled.

He yanked me through the crowds and into the hallway that led to the back door. We made it to the first intersection when another group of men in sunglasses appeared down the hall in front of us. To our right was another one of the heavy doors.

"Damn it. . ." I muttered.

"This way!" Quinn ordered me. He slammed the sole of his foot into the door. I expected him to be loud in pain, but it was the door that was in pain. It's knob lock snapped in half and the door swung open on its hinges to slam against the inner wall. There was an indent in the door in the shape of his foot.

Quinn pulled me inside just a second before the men in black reached us. I expected this room to be like the one with a caged animal, but it was an office. There was a desk, chairs and a couple filing cabinets against the far wall, but no windows. Quinn swung into the room and slammed the door into the faces of our pursuers. He grabbed the nearby filing cabinet and dragged the heavy metal against the door. Quinn turned around and nodded at a vent a foot below the ceiling and just above the desk.

"Climb in there and take the first right," he ordered me.

He didn't need to tell me twice. In a couple steps I was on top of the desk. My sheet dropped to the ground, but I was too busy tearing away the cover of the event to care. I climbed into the hole with Quinn right behind me. Our followers weren't too happy about being filed away behind the cabinet. They slammed their shoulders into the broken door and I was a couple feet into the vent when I heard the cabinet topple to the floor. A dozen footsteps crashed into the room and Quinn shoved my ass forward.

"Get moving, detective!" he shouted at me.

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CHAPTER 24

I crawled as fast as my hands and knees could manage. The first right was fifteen feet down the shaft. Light from outside streamed through the vent opening. I reached the opening and saw that it looked out on the alley beside the building. I shoved my shoulder into the grate and it flew out and clattered to the ground. In a thrice I landed on my feet in the alley and Quinn was close behind me.

"This way," he told me as he led me down the alley in the opposite direction of the busy road.

I followed mostly because I didn't have a plan of my own, and his seemed to be working for us so far. We reached the alley intersection and took a right down the alley behind the adjoining building. The building was on our our right and the wooden fence was on our left. We passed by trash cans and broken crates. I heard a noise behind us and looked over my shoulder. The men in shades streamed out of the back door of the Wolf's Den. It only took them a few seconds to figure out which way we went and then they were in hot pursuit of our trail.

"I hope you have a better plan than running all night long!" I shouted at Quinn.

"I always do!" Quinn replied.

We came to the end of the building and had two choices to run. There was straight ahead or to the right. Quinn took the left which was the wooden fence. He slammed his shoulder into the fence. I expected an explosion of wood or maybe a broken shoulder, but instead a panel swung open the size of a door and Quinn raced through it. I flew in after him and he slammed the panel behind us. We were on the other side of the fence, but definitely not out of trouble yet.

We hurried a few steps forward and knelt beside a manhole. Quinn pulled off the cover and slipped down a ladder. I stopped at the edge and peered into the darkness below me.

"You're kidding, right?" I asked him as he disappeared into the shadows of the sewers.

"If you stay there long enough then you can ask those those guys if they're joking around," Quinn quipped.

I decided our pursuers probably weren't the type to play practical jokes so I climbed down into sewer.

"Close the hole behind you," Quinn shouted at me from the bottom of the ladder.

I did as he told and not a moment too soon. The round lid slid into place just as I heard a mess of heavy footsteps arrive on the other side of the fence. Heavy bodies slammed through the wood fence and clambered over the manhole. Quinn and I didn't wait around to ask if they needed directions to find us. We sloshed through the muck and filthy water without light or map.

"I hope you know where you're going," I spoke up.

"I wouldn't be going this way if I didn't," Quinn retorted.

"Good, then you can tell me why we're mucking through the sewers," I returned.

"If they get down here they can't follow our scents," Quinn explained.

We took a corner in the darkness and I heard a scratching noise behind us. I stopped at the turn and glanced over my shoulder. our pursuers were pretty desperate to get at us. As I watched them splash down into the muck from the sewer opening. I followed after Quinn before I lost him. He was faster than I expected him to be considering all the time as times I saw him sitting down compared to standing up. We flew through those sewer tunnels like he could see in the dark. Even my super vision could barely see more than dark outlines of the walls.

We sloshed through the sewers for a couple of hours before Quinn stopped us at another letter. We climbed up and into the fresh late morning early morning air. Our exit was in an upscale neighborhood, the type of beat every cop wanted because the worst offense was jaywalking. The tall, old houses were protected behind thick stone walls that had more security than some banks.

I stumbled against one of these posh walls and sloshed sewer water all over its whitewash. A faint glow in the western sky told me the sun would be up within the hour. It had been a hell of a twenty-four hours and I was exhausted.

"This way," Quinn instructed me as he strode forward.

"Can't you give me a few minutes to die?" I quipped.

He paused and turned to me. "If someone sees you they're going to call the cops."

I snorted. "Just my luck to be arrested after all this shit."

"This shit would be almost over if you'd get your ass moving behind me, detective," Quinn insisted.

I glared at him. "Mind cutting me some slack? For the last twenty-four hours I've been through hell on an out-of-control merry-go-round."

He jerked his head towards one of the larger homes. It was an old Victorian place with enough creeps to scare Dracula. The large lawn was surrounded by a black iron bar fence with bushes behind that. "I'll give you slack inside there."

I raised an eyebrow. "Why there?"

"I'll tell you inside," he insisted.

He turned and walked off. I sighed and strode after him. We reached the front gates, an impressive mess of wrought-iron workmanship that cost more than my four years of police training. There was a thick chain twined around the pair of gates with a padlock the size of a softball keeping the two ends of the chain together. Quinn pulled out a key and opened the lock. He swung open the gate and we slipped inside. Quinn shut the lock behind us and we walked up the gravel driveway to the small front porch.

The place had a creepy vibe to it that I just couldn't place. Maybe it was the thick black curtains in the windows or the complete silence around the place, or maybe it was the crows on the roof that watched us with their beady red eyes.

"Does Dracula know we're coming?" I quipped.

Quinn paused on the front step of the porch and turned to me with a funny smile. "Maybe, but let's get inside."

Quinn unlocked the front door and swung open the entrance. He swept his arm into the dark hall. "Ladies first."

I snorted. "We'd still have to flip a coin to decide who goes first," I quipped.

That creepy smile didn't slide from his lips, but he did step inside first. I followed and looked around. The place was dark, but clean. There was a long hallway that led to the rear and the wings of the house were on either side of the entrance hall. The stairs to the second floor were to the left of the hallway and I saw there was a doorway beneath the stairs that probably led to the basement.

Quinn walked past me and down the hall towards the rear of the house. "There's a bedroom upstairs you can use if you're tired, and some food in the fridge," he told me.

I grabbed his shoulder and stopped him. "Where the hell do

you think you're going?" I questioned him.

He glanced over his shoulder at me and frowned. "To sleep. Even I can't stay up forever."

I shook my head. "First we finish the talk we were having at the club," I insisted.

"Right now?"

"Right now."

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CHAPTER 25

It had been a hell of a night, but I wasn't going to go to bed until I had my answers. There I was in Quinn's house, and he and I were seated opposite each other in his living room. I sat on the couch, and he was in a chair.

He leaned against the back of his chair and clasped his hands together in his lap. "What would you like to know first?"

I nodded at his inner jacket pocket. "I'd like to know what's on that disk."

He grinned and shook his head. "Not until I get what I want."

"So what will you tell me right now?" I asked him.

He nodded at my hands. "I can tell you how to get rid of that."

I raised my hands and looked at my clawed fingers. My fingers hadn't changed back. I ground my teeth together and fisted my hands as I felt the clause break the skin of my palms.

"This is only part of my problem. Making this go away isn't going to rid of the curse," I told him.

"No, but you'll be able to help me and yourself by hiding what you are now," he pointed out.

I opened my fists and my eyes flickered up to him. "How the hell do you think you know so much? Did you learn it all from the disk?"

He grinned and shrugged. "Maybe I did, and maybe I didn't. All you need to know is what I tell you now."

I jumped to my feet and glared at him. "You think I'm some servant dog because I look like this? I won't take orders from you." I held my fists in front of me so he could clearly see it. "I could crush steel with these. What makes you think I won't put a dent in that face of yours?"

Quinn chuckled. "For one, you're a detective, Detective. To protect and serve is your motto. I won't believe for a second that just because you look like a monster that you've become one. For another, you don't quite have a grasp on what you're capable of."

"And you know what I'm capable of?" I questioned him.

"More than you know, but I don't think we're getting anywhere with your questions." He stood and gestured to the doorway. "Maybe we should get some sleep and-"

"I don't want any sleep!" I screamed. I took a step towards him and felt my teeth lengthen into fangs. "I want answers, and you're going to give them to me now!"

Quinn's smile slid off his lips and he folded his arms across his chest. "You're letting the beast take control of you. That wouldn't be a good idea around me."

I ticked off everything that ticked me off. His smug attitude, the miserable night I'd had, and all the stupid mystery that I'd dealt with since that night. I couldn't take it anymore. I sprang at him with my claws and teeth bared. He just stood there waiting for me to jump on him like he was a giant wolf treat, and the next second he was gone. Vanished like a ghost.

That didn't stop me. I landed where he had stood and lifted my head. My nose sniffed the air for him, and I whipped my head back to glance over my shoulder.

Quinn stood where I had jumped from. His eyes were narrowed and I detected a reddish hue in their depths. I snarled and spun around to make another leap at him, but the next moment he was gone again. My eyes widened and I looked and I slept my gaze over the room.

"Behind you," Quinn's voice spoke up. A pair of arms reached around me and pulled me against a hard chess. I strained and kicked, but the strength of my captor was unbelievable. "Calm down or I will crush you," Quinn threatened me.

"Let me go!" I growled.

"Call me down, Detective!" he insisted. The next words he spoke were softer, but no less firm. "I'll tell you more of what you want to know if you come down."

"I said let me go!" I snarled. I was too far gone to care about anything except getting his blood on my teeth.

"Get a hold of yourself, Detective Maria Selena!" Quinn snapped at me. "You're better than this! Fight it!

I shut my eyes and ground my sharp teeth together. God dammit, but he was right. I wasn't the bloodthirsty type. It didn't suit my badge. I did an old trick my dad once taught me.

"One, two, three, four. . ." I counted off until I hit ten. I took a deep breath and opened my eyes. The world was no longer red, and I noticed my fangs were teeth and all of the hair and claws were gone from my hands.

"Very well done, Detective," Quinn complemented me.

Quinn opened his arms and I dropped to the ground. I pressed my hands against my face and didn't feel the peach fuzz of wolf hair, though the normal spots for my hair were still long and thick. I spun around to face him. Quinn stood there with his arms crossed and that strange glint in his eyes. I raised an eyebrow.

"What are you?" I asked him.

He chuckled. "Now you're asking the right questions."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "What you talking about?"

He shrugged and walked over to his chair. "And there you go asking the wrong questions again," he scolded me as he took a seat. He clasped his hands together in front of his face with his elbows on the arms of the chair and looked at me over his fingers. "You asked me what I was. What I am is a vampire."

I shook my head and ran a hand through my thick, wolfy hair. "You've got to be kidding me. . ." I grumbled.

"Some nights I wish I was, but this night isn't one of them," Quinn replied. He dropped his hands into his lap and smirked. "I don't mean to brag, but I'm pretty old even for my kind. It was my love of information that kept me alive, and keeps me in business."

I opened my eyes and glared at him. "So you're telling me that you want a werewolf to work for you, a vampire, to gets something from a mob boss?"

"That's exactly what I'm telling you," he confirmed.

I dropped onto the couch. "If you're such an old and powerful vampire then why don't you get it yourself?"

He smiled and shook his head. "They'd spot me in an instant. You saw what happened at the club."

I leaned forward and frowned. "Speaking of that, why did you have us meet at the club, and who were those men who chased us?" I questioned him.

Quinn studied my face. "You don't believe I'm a vampire."

"I believe you believe it," I quipped.

"But that's not quite the same thing, but I suppose it doesn't matter," he mused. "What matters is that I have that vial in my possession so I can put the disk in yours."

"How am I supposed to get this vial when you can't?" I asked him.

"Like I said before, with your-shall we say new personality-you'll fit right in with this crowd," he assured me. He glanced over my body and frowned. "We'll have to get something more suitable

for the occasion, but you'll fit fine into a slick dress."

"You forgot one thing. I still don't have an invitation, and if this guy's as powerful as you're implying then he's going to have the place watched and wired for security," I pointed out.

Quinn stood and stretched his arms above his head. "That's for you to figure out, Detective. I'll give you a dress and a ride. The rest is up to you."

I narrowed my eyes. "That disk better be worth it," I warned him.

"I think you'll find my information very-well, interesting," he assured me.

"How interesting?" I asked him.

"Just the identity of this-well, we'll call this Shadow a man, and his dealings throughout the city. It could blow the criminal world wide open. You would be a hero, the city's savior," he mused.

"I don't care about being a hero, but if what you're telling me is true-"

"And it is," he insisted.

"-then what you have there is evidence of criminal activity, and needs to be handed over, so give it," I demanded as I held out my hand palm-up to him.

He chuckled and patted his chest. "You know I don't work for free, Detective, and this certainly cost me a great deal. That's why I'm asking for the vial."

I folded my arms across my chest. "And I'm supposed to trust a self-proclaimed vampire to hand over that disk after I get the vial?"

He grinned and bowed his head. "You have my word, Detective."

I snorted. "Keep it. It's not worth the breath you used to say it."

"If that is all you have to say then I think it's time we got some rest," Quinn suggested. He walked past me and towards the doorway.

"This questioning isn't over, Quinn. Not by a long shot," I warned him.

He waved to me as he left the room. "Good day, Detective."

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CHAPTER 26

I sat on the couch for a few minutes thinking about what Quinn had said. None of it sounded sane, but my world had become one long stay at a psycho ward. I leaned forward and ran a hand through my hair.

"What do you have to lose?" I whispered to myself.

Well, beside my life. My sanity was already forfeit.

I got up and looked out the window. The sun peeked over the horizon and spilled into the room. Another day, another mess to get into.

I walked out of the living room and into the entrance hall. The house was eerily quiet. Too quiet. The last few days had trained me to treat quiet as a threat. I moved to the bottom of the stairs and looked up.

"Quinn?" I called.

No answer. My sensitive hearing didn't even hear a board creak. I wished for my gun as I slowly moved up the stairs. The second floor had two hallways. One traveled the length of the house, and the other the width. There were six doors; two to my right, two to my left, and the others in front of me at the back of the house. A door to my right and in front of me was partially ajar. I crept forward and glanced down at my sides. Nothing and nobody there.

I reached the door and peeked inside. It was a large bedroom with a dresser, oriental rugs that cost more than my pension, and some paintings of demons attacking women. The windows opposite the door were covered in a thick layer of dark curtains. The bed was missing, but there was a long, rectangular box in its place and a nightstand beside the head.

"You've got to be kidding me. . ." I murmured as I slipped inside.

I crept up to the box and looked it over. It was made of some dark-red wood and the hinges were on the side that faced away from the door. I knelt down and slipped my fingers beneath the lid. An easy lift and the lid flew open. I looked in.

Quinn looked back at me.

I yelped and stumbled back on my hands and knees. My eyes

never left the box as my back hit the wall close to the door. I tried to get a hold of my oncoming heart attack and make some sense out of what I saw. Whatever I saw, it wasn't Quinn sitting up. Nobody appeared out of the box.

I slid my back up the wall onto my feet and peered into the box. Quinn lay there in the same position with his eyes staring at the ceiling.

"Quinn?" I whispered. No reply, and no breathing. His chest didn't move an inch.

I slipped over to the box, and looked down at Quinn and his bed. The inside of the box was lined with soft red velvet and there was a pillow at the head. Quinn lay there with his hands clasped on his chest and as still as death.

I knelt beside the box and took hold of one of his arms. He didn't object, and I checked for his pulse. I felt the color drain from my face when I didn't feel anything. No pulse, but there also wasn't any rigor mortus. If this guy was a stiff, he wasn't stiff yet. That meant either I was dealing with a freshly dead guy, or a long undead guy.

Unfortunately, in my recent line of work my brain aimed towards the latter rather than the former, and I guessed Quinn was a former human-turned-blood sucker. I dropped his hand back onto his chest and looked at his pale face.

"Damn it, Quinn. Why'd you have to do this to me?" I murmured. I turned around and rested my back against the side of the coffin. "Seriously? Why couldn't you have been just a normal guy?"

"Because that is no more me than it is you," a voice whispered in my ear.

I yelped and sprang to my feet. I spun around and saw Quinn in a seated position with a smile slapped on his face.

"You're supposed to be dead!" I shouted at him.

"Undead, Detective," he corrected me.

I frowned and crossed my arms over my chest. "If you're undead than how are you awake? And why the hell didn't you wake up when I was checking your pulse?"

"I thought it would be more amusing and useful if you found out the truth for yourself," he explained. "And I taught you a valuable lesson."

"What's that?" I questioned him.

His smile slid off his face and his voice was firm. "That you shouldn't turn your back on a person unless you're sure they're dead. Permanently."

I threw my hands up in the air. "Fine, you're not dead and you're not alive. I admit that. Happy?"

He covered his mouth to hide a yawn. "No. You interrupted my rest, and I'll ask that you not do it again. Your bedroom is across the hall, and as I said before there's food in the fridge. Now I'll bid you good day and we'll resume our discussion after night fall." He grabbed the lid and shut it over himself.

I shook my head and sighed. "You're in deep shit. . ."

"How very true, Detective," came Quinn's muffled voice from the coffin.

I left the room and made sure to give the door a good bang shut on my way out. The force shook the wall, and Quinn yelled something that didn't get through the door but what I understand as a four-letter word with my name attached. I grinned and moved to the room on the opposite side of the hall. It was a normal bedroom with a normal bed.

I sat down on the foot and fell back onto the bed. The white ceiling stared back at me, and I sighed.

"What I wouldn't give to go to sleep and wake up at my apartment. . ." I whispered.

Wishful thinking wasn't going to get me anywhere, so I tucked my legs onto the bed and closed my eyes.

My nocturnal habits guaranteed I slept, and it wasn't until an hour before sunset that I woke up. I sat up and rubbed my eyes. One glance out the window gave me a good estimate of the time, and the clock on the nightstand confirmed it. I sat up in my wrinkled clothes and stretched. One of my hands got caught in the tangle of mess. That hadn't changed since last night, and I guessed I was stuck with it, at least until I got this curse off me.

I found the bathroom down the hall and one of Quinn's combs. In a few minutes I was brushed and a little more awake. Armed with my newfound wakefulness, I glanced down he hall at Quinn's room. I walked down the hall and knocked on the door.

"You still dead?" I called.

"No," was the reply.

I opened the door a crack and peeked my head inside. The coffin lid was still shut. "So are you going to tell me what I'm

supposed to do tonight or what?"

"You can wait an hour, Detective," he scolded me.

"Sun allergy?" I guessed.

"Something of the sort," he agreed.

I closed the door and my stomach gurgled. I couldn't remember the last time I'd eaten, so I took up Quinn's offer and raided his fridge. He had a mix of the weird and normal. Milk sat beside blood bags, and there was even a chocolate cake and some vegetables. The vegetables survived my raid, but the chocolate cake wasn't so lucky.

Quinn stumbled into the kitchen and caught me nibbling on the last bites at the kitchen table. His pale face was as white as a sheet and he moved with the agility of an old man.

"I've been livelier cadavers," I quipped as he shuffled towards the bridge.

He grabbed one of the blood bags and popped it open. The contents were downed faster than a tackled suspect. He dropped the bag into the trash and took a seat opposite me looking a little livelier than before.

"That your addiction?" I guessed.

"My morning coffee," he rephrased.

"Uh-huh. So are you still wanting me to go through with this party or do we have a different deal?" I asked him.

He smiled. "The deal is still on, Detective."

I leaned back and opened my arms. "Then I hope you've got some plans for my clothes because I don't think these ragged things are going to cut it."

"I might have something in my closet," he replied. "Come with me."

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CHAPTER 27

Quinn led me upstairs to the bedroom he'd given me. He slid open the closet door and revealed a pretty wide assortment of elegant evening gowns. I stood beside him and turned to him.

"You swing that way?" I asked him.

He smiled and shook his head. "These are treasures from those women I particularly admired." Quinn took out a slinky red dress with a plunging back and neckline. Two stringy straps kept the dress from falling off its hanger. "This was from a very lovely young lady some years ago. She had an intriguing sense of fashion."

"And a poor taste in men," I quipped.

"That's why our relationship was short," he assured me.

My eyes scanned all the different sizes, styles, and ages. "These better not be treasures from your victims."

"I assure you they were all alive. When I left them, that is," he told me. He held the thin dress out to me. "Care to try it on?"

I looked from the dress to him. "You've got to be kidding. I've seen more clothing on a tissue."

"And you'll see less at the ball, but this might leave you the talk of the party," he told me.

I frowned, but snatched the hanger from his hand. "I'm supposed to blend in, remember?"

"You'll blend in just fine until you open your mouth," he quipped.

I glared at him. "What the hell is that-" He pointed down at my hands.

"That."

I followed his finger and my shoulders slumped. My hands were back to hairy paws.

"You have to learn to control your temper, Detective," he advised me.

"Maybe if I didn't feel like slugging the company," I retorted.

"Then I recommend you not talk to anybody and get the job done as quickly as possible," he suggested.

I pursed my lips and jerked my thumb towards the door. "Out."

"I could help you on with-"

"Out."

He held up his hands and skirted around me. "All right. Come out when you're ready."

He slipped out into the hall and I slipped into the dress, if you could call it that. The flimsy piece of cloth was as near to naked as I wanted to get without being in bed with Shadow.

I paused and frowned. "Seriously? You have to think about him right now. . ." I mumbled to myself.

"Problems?" Quinn called through the door.

"Plenty, and they'd be solved if you just gave me that disk," I returned.

"Not yet, Detective. You still have that small errand to do for me," he scolded me.

I sighed and completed the dress by finding some shoes at the bottom of the closet. They were heels, but by the grace of my new wolf agility I managed to walk in them. I opened the door and stepped out into the hall. Quinn leaned against the opposite wall, but he stood at attention and his eyes swept over my body. I blushed and crossed my arms over my chest.

"Not bad, Detective," he complimented me.

"Say another word and I'll rip out your tongue while you're sleeping," I growled.

He held up his hands. "I was merely admiring your feminine assets."

"And I'm going to kick yours from here to the Pacific for making me do this," I snapped.

"You're getting ahead of yourself, Detective," he scolded me. He pulled out the house plans and handed them to me. "This job won't be easy, and to be honest I half expect you to get caught."

"If I do I'll put in a good word for you," I promised as I tucked the folded paper into my cleavage. There wasn't enough cloth anywhere else in the dress to hide a mouse.

"I imagine you will, but my other half says you'll get out of trouble. You always do," he pointed out.

"There's a first time for everything, but how about we skip the small talk and get this over with?" I recommended.

"As you wish," he obeyed.

Quinn led me downstairs and into the free-standing garage in the backyard. He opened the door and flipped on a light. The bulb overhead revealed a red convertible with black interior leather and a shine that hurt my eyes.

"Your weekend car?" I guessed.

"Strictly for business," he assured me.

We hopped in with Quinn at the wheel and backed out. He drove us down the suburban roads and to the more upscale neighborhoods where the lawns were larger than most apartment buildings. Stone walls encased grand mansions in tight security, and more than one gate sported a guardhouse.

I couldn't make out any details. The world sped by like a zoom blur on a camera. I held my hair down with one hand and gripped the top of the door with the other.

"You have a death wish?" I yelled at Quinn over the whistling wind.

"No, but I do have this immunity to it," he called back.

"I don't, so do you mind slowing down?" I snapped.

"Certainly, especially as we're here," he told me.

Quinn slowed down and I noticed a line of cars at the open gates to a stone-and-wood castle. The vehicles were in the same class and price range as Quinn's, and sported people in dresses like mine. Quinn pulled into the lineup and we drove through the gates. A row of tall oaks led the way up a short hill to the castle. The house itself had three floors and a few towers. The stone walls were smoothly carved and shone in the bright blaze of lights that lit up the front entrance. People parked their cars and walked up the short path to the open pair of wooden doors. Valets took their vehicles to a large gravel parking lot fifty yards left of the house.

"What now?" I asked Quinn.

"We'll drive to the parking garage and you'll make your way to the house," he whispered to me as we passed the front doors and drove towards the garage. "I'll wait for you there while you find a way inside, grab the vial, and make your way out."

"Is that all? And here I thought it was going to be hard," I quipped.

"Don't underestimate these people, Detective," he warned me. He nodded at a few large men in black suits who stood in the shadows of the house. "They and three dozen others like them are who you need to watch out for."

"How the hell am I supposed to get even ten feet with that many guys around?" I snapped at him.

"Your new abilities are more powerful than you know. Use them," he advised.

We drove into the parking lot and found a spot at the far right close to the house. The garage itself

Quinn shut off the engine and turned to me. "It's show time, Detective."

I climbed out and glared at him. "If I get out of this alive I'm kicking your balls all the way down to the police station."

"If you get out of this alive I will gladly agree to your request," he quipped.

I turned my back on the car and hurried along the dimly lit parking spaces. A few temporary electric lamp posts were positioned between the cars and cast long shadows over the gravel. I weaved in and out of the vehicles and ended at the far end of the lot close to the house. There was twenty yards between me and some short bushes that surrounded the house. I also had to contend with a small, private army of men-in-black with headsets in their ears and dark glasses over their eyes. They marched to and fro in a pattern that didn't offer any holes. I'd have to pull off some epic Matrix shit if I wanted to get past them.

Fortunately, I had some epic Matrix shit in me, and I was a cop. This stakeout wasn't new to me, but being on the other side of the law was. There were a couple of oak trees that grew a little too close to the house, and a small ventilation window on the roof that looked a little neglected.

I lowered myself onto my hands and knees and crawled across the damp lawn. The point of my high heels stabbed into the grass and left little dents in the otherwise spotless carpet. I reached the closest oak tree five yards from me and ten yards from my target.

The bark was smooth, but that wasn't going to be a problem. I held out my hands and concentrated. Long fingernails and claws emerged, and soon I had my only permanently attached climbing claws. I jabbed my fingernails into the soft bark and began my ascent into the thick foliage. In a few moments the lowest branch was reached, and I leapt up until I was even with the lowest part of the roof. The roof was made of shingles and slanted at a thirty-five degree angle.

I crawled across the thickest, longest branch, and paused at the point where my body weight would have meant a hard crack with a harder fall. I hunkered down and glanced between my legs. The ground was fifteen yards below me, and so were the men in black. I crept a little closer to the house. My hand brushed against a small,

dry twig that snapped and fell. I tried to snatch it, but the twig fell between my claws and dropped to the ground. The twig hit the grass just behind one of the guards. He didn't notice a thing.

I took a deep breath and looked at the roof. It was ten feet away, but I couldn't risk another mistake like that. I stood and took my heels in my hands. I backed up, steadied myself, and sprinted forward. My instincts told me when to jump, and I sprang forward at the point where the branch became pencil thin. I flew through the air with the heels flailing in my hands and landed with a soft thud on the tiled roof.

I stiffened and listened for the men beneath me to yell out some alarm. It never came. My sensitive ears picked up on their scheduled march. I quickly crawled up to the ventilation cover and used a claw to screw the cover loose. In a few moments I slipped into the attic.

I'd made it inside, but the fun wasn't over.

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CHAPTER 28

My new and improved eyes let me see in the near-black out conditions. The attic had a low, open-rafter ceiling and was filled with the usual attic stuff. Old, three-hundred year old furniture, priceless works of art worth more than the entire yearly city budget, a small forest of mannequins that sported ancient dresses, and piles of boxes that sported names like Ferrari Parts and Heirloom Jewelry. Just the usual junk.

There was a hatch in the floor at the front end of the attic. I tiptoed along the attic and over to the hatch. The dust underfoot told me none of the black men would be up here, and they needed to hire some better cleaners.

I reached the hatch and slipped my claws underneath the thin board. A quick tug told me why the cleaners didn't get up here. It was locked, and from the other side. My eyes caught on the hinges of the hatch, and I tiptoed around to them. I raised my clawed hands and pursed my lips.

"Don't fail me now. . ." I whispered.

I wedged my fingers into the space between the hatch and the floor at the center of the back of the hatch. The boards were thick and I anchored my feet beneath me. I narrowed my eyes and, with a single tug, tore the hatch and its hinges out of the floor. The destruction made a minor ripping noise that made me cringe.

My sensitive ears caught a voice and some fast-moving footsteps. I quickly put the hatch down and stepped away from the hole. The footsteps stopped beneath the hatch and I caught a man's voice.

"The sound came from here," he commented. There was a pause. "Yes, I see it. I'll check it out."

My heart thumped in my chest and I looked around for some place to hide. A mannequin close by gave me an idea, and I hurried to my plan.

I was prepared when the hatch creaked open and a man with dark shades peeked into the attic. He was a little surprised when the back of the hatch popped off the floor. The guard stepped into the attic and held the broken hatch in one hand.

"I think we might have a problem," he whispered into his

receiver.

"Take care of it," I heard a muffled voice respond.

"Yes, sir," the guard replied.

He set the hatch onto the floor and pulled off his glasses. His eyes were a bright yellow, and it didn't take a forensic genius to guess he was a werewolf. He scanned the attic and slowly made his way through the closest mess of stuff. I held my breath as he came closer to my hiding spot.

The guard reached the spot where I hid and froze. His lips curled back in a snarl as he caught my scent, and he lunged at my red, clean dress that stood out among the other old garb. He wrapped his arms around the flimsy clothing and squeezed the body tight in his grasp

"Stay where you-" His order was interrupted when the mannequin's head popped off and dropped to the floor at his feet.

I jumped to my feet to his left dressed in the mannequin's ancient garb and grinned at him. "Sorry, doll face, but you've got the wrong dummy."

I swung a hard right that connected with the side of his face. He was sent sprawling into the furniture and his back landed on one of the shrink couches. His head lolled back and he slumped over the cushions.

I slipped back into my slightly mussed red dress and covered the guard with the old garb. "Next time take a second sniff," I advised him.

I didn't waste too much time on quips. The guards would soon learn one of their own was missing and go searching for him. I climbed down the stairs he'd kindly left for me and found myself in a long hallway that ran the length of the building. Doors lined either side of the long, carpeted passage. This was the third floor, and according to the floor plan Quinn gave me my objective was on the first.

I closed the attic entrance, put my heels back on and hurried down the hall. The stairs were at the other end. My pace was just short of a sprint as I hurried to them, but even that didn't give me enough time. I heard voices and the sounds of several footsteps. I froze and looked around. No place to hide but the rooms, and I didn't feel like trapping myself in one of them.

So I decided to play it bold.

I rushed down the remainder of the hallway and met a pair of

guards at the top of the stairs. They stopped and the lead one held up his hand.

"Stop!" he ordered me.

"Please help me!" I yelled. I stumbled into his outstretched arm and clung onto it. "Something's wrong! I saw a man go up there-" I pointed at the closed hatch, "-and I heard a noise, and the hatch closed and please help him!"

The guards looked at each other and nodded. They rushed past me towards the hatch. I grinned and waved at them as I walked backwards down the stairs.

"Thanks for the help," I whispered as I made my getaway down the stairs.

Those were two lucky breaks, but I could still strike out on the third. The stairs ran down to the first floor. I passed the landing for the second and made it to the ground floor and the mess of people who came for the party and stayed for the alcohol.

The ground floor of the castle-house was split down the middle by the stairs and the hallway that ran from its foot. At the front half to my right was the constant flow of people through the dining room near the stairs or the ballroom at the opposite front end of the house. The entrance hall took up the rest of the space in front. All of these rooms were open into the stairs hallway through wide, open doorways.

At the far end of the back was the study with a connected two-floor library. Closest to the stairs and to me were the kitchen and two bathrooms the size of my apartment. That completed the elegant castle's main floor except for a patio out back that was accessed by two pairs of French doors past the bathrooms.

The people were grouped into their familiar circles of friends, family and admirers, or they roamed the large dining hall and ballroom with an escort attached to their arm. I slowed my run to a walk and slapped on my brightest smile to blend in with the intoxicated crowd of silver-spoons and rich-nouveau.

I hated to admit it, but Quinn was right. My dress fit in and a slid through the crowd like a ghost. That didn't mean I was problem-free. I had a bunch of problems that equaled the number of guests and guards. My sensitive nose told me all these people dressed in jewels and expensive footwear weren't just filthy rich. They were all werewolves. I could smell a hint of hair on all of them, and it didn't come from the real and fake fur they wore.

Whoever this Night guy was, he'd invited all the wealthy werewolves to howling good party.

I kept my calm and focused on my job. The plans for the house had pointed to a short hall that separated the lower floor of the library from the study. That was the only way into the study other than climbing in through a window or going through the upper balconies of the two-floor library. I spotted a pair of thick wood doors that led to the hall, and quickened my steps.

A hand reached out and grabbed my arm. I instinctively twisted in their grasp, but they were a lot stronger than me.

"Let go of-" I spun around to find myself staring into the troubled face of Shadow. He wore a black suit that showed off his dark, unhappy eyes.

Shadow glanced around us and pulled me close to him. "What are you doing here?" he hissed.

I yanked my arm, but he held me tight. "None of your business, so back off," I shot back.

"You are my business."

"Then I'm foreclosing on you," I quipped.

"Thomas! Thomas, there you are!" a female called to him. I looked over my shoulder and saw a woman with a dead animal slung across her shoulders walking towards us. She sported a fancy dress and heels that were sharp enough to be deadly weapons.

"Thomas?" I asked him.

The woman reached us and scowled at me. "Thomas, who is this?" she asked him. She leaned towards me and sniffed me. "She has your family's scent."

"She's a new addition to the family. A part of Night's harem," he explained.

It was at that moment that I saw movement behind Shadow. A half dozen guards rushed down the stairs and looked over the crowd. I shrank between Shadow and the annoying woman.

"Oh? When did she join?" she questioned him.

"Not now, Gloria. Maybe another time," Shadow pleaded.

Shadow pushed past her and yanked me through the doors that led into the hall towards the study. The door to the study was on my right, and the library door lay on the left. A window at the far end showed the long patio. Shadow pressed me against the wall of the study and placed his hands on both sides of my head.

"Now tell me what you're doing here," he demanded.

I tried to slip out from under one of his arms, but he lowered it and blocked my way. "How about you tell me what that bullshit about being party of the harem was? You think I'm some sort of a sex toy now, is that it?"

"No, that is not it, but you shouldn't be here. There's no place less safe for you than here," he insisted.

"If you're not going to explain what you said then why don't you leave me the hell alone?" I growled.

He pushed his face into mine so our noses almost touched. "Because like it or not you are my responsibility, and I-" I slammed my forehead into his.

Shadow stumbled back and clutched his forehead. I rushed to the study door and slipped into. My eyes swept over the joint. There was the usual fancy oak desk in the far left corner in front of some tall windows, and a bunch of bookshelves on either side of me and on the wall behind me. A balcony lay overhead with more bookshelves and a door that led into the library. In front of me and to the right was a wooden cabinet, and to the right of that was the spiral staircase that led up to the balcony.

I glimpsed a glass case on one of the shelves to the left of the desk and rushed over. A glass vial with a dark red liquid inside was set on a pedestal. The top was plugged by a cork. I didn't have time to show off my claw glass-cutting technique, so I slammed my fist into the glass and snatched the vial from its case. My ears picked up on a whining noise that told me an alarm had gone off.

Shadow rushed into the room and spotted me by the desk. He hurried over, but I put the desk between us.

"What are you doing?" he hissed.

"Trying to get out of here if you'd just stay out of my way," I snapped.

My opening for a quick escape closed when the study door opened and in stepped the group of guards. Shadow spun around, and they pointed their guns at both of us. The guards parted and revealed the annoying Gloria with a man who I recognized from Quinn's photos as Night. The pair stepped into the room, and Night studied me and shook his head.

"You're right. I don't recognize this one," he told Gloria.

She beamed with pride and gave a nod. "I didn't believe I'd seen her among your harem," she commented.

"Thank you for bringing this to my attention," Night praised

her. "Now if you will excuse us, I have something to discuss with them."

Gloria frowned. "Whatever can be discussed in front of my fiance can surely be discussed in front-"

"Don't take too many liberties, Gloria. The marriage hasn't occurred yet," Night warned her.

Gloria's eyes blazed like a five-alarm chili bowl at Matilda's diner, but she spun around and stomped out of the room. One of the goons closed the door behind her, and the owner of the house turned to Shadow and me.

"Good evening, Father."

"Good evening, Son."

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CHAPTER 29

Normally a cold reception like that would've just given me the chills. This time it just downright confused the hell out of me. It wasn't Night who addressed Shadow as his son, but the other way around. The biggest problem I saw was those two were a hell of a lot different in ages, and Night was definitely the older guy.

"I'm glad you accepted my invitation to my party, but I think you're taking far too many liberties in making yourself at home in my study," Night scolded Shadow.

Shadow's eyes narrowed. "I accepted your invitation only to try to convince you to stop your dealings."

Night laughed and strode a few steps to our left. "Always the caring father, aren't you? Afraid your son will overshadow you?"

"If you don't watch your steps you'll reveal us all to the humans," Shadow snapped.

Night paused and whipped his head around to glare at Shadow. "I'm not the one who left the two bodies by the river for the police force to find." He glanced behind Shadow and at me. I hid the vial behind me back and glared back at him. "And I also didn't turn one of their own into one of us."

I would've been glad to get out of the way and let these two go at it in a domestic brawl, but the goons behind Night didn't look like they'd let me waltz out. They'd have to be persuaded, but I'd left my sledge hammer in my other dress.

"Those men were sent on your orders to capture the Moonstone," Shadow pointed out.

Night sighed and shook his head. "You always have to blame me, don't you? It's almost as if I'm the only one of us who's grown up."

"If you won't listen then there's nothing more to say. We'll leave right now-" Night held up his hand and pointed a finger at me.

"The girl is an interesting dilemma. Have you forgotten what you taught me about loose ends, Father?" he asked him. Shadow didn't reply. He only glared at the other man. Night grinned and shrugged. "But perhaps she caught your fancy. I can understand that. She is quite pretty. But what will Mother think?"

I frowned. This was a new angle for Shadow I hadn't heard, and I didn't like the thought of hanging around a married guy's bed.

Shadow stiffened. "What she thinks is of no concern to me."

Night clucked his tongue and walked around us to a cabinet against the wall on my left between two bookshelves. The spiral staircase to the balcony was just to his right.

"Don't say such things. It hurts my feelings to be reminded of your separation." Our 'host' opened the doors and took out some wine glasses and a glass of the stuff. "Besides, I wanted to congratulate you on keeping her alive until her wound healed. It must have taken some doing to send her to the right hospital and have yourself assigned to her care." He placed the glasses on the desk and poured out the wine into each of them. "You must have been 'conveniently' available, am I right?"

I frowned and glanced at Shadow. "What's he talking about?"

"Nothing of importance," Shadow replied.

Night looked up from the glasses and a crooked smile slid onto his lips. "Is that how you treat your new toys? Keep them at arm's length and hope they don't try to touch your cold heart?"

"You're heart is the only cold organ here," Shadow argued.

"I'm not the one keeping secrets, and you both appear to have some interesting secrets," he commented. His eyes flitted over to me and he jerked his head towards my arms. "Have you asked her why she's holding the vial of ancient vampire blood that's the prize of my collection?"

"You should keep your stuff under better protection," I retorted.

He picked up two of the glasses of wine and chuckled. "I must admit my security is a little lax. No one who knows me would dare break into my home, much less to steal one of my most prized possessions."

"Then I'd like to keep not knowing you and leave," I quipped.

Night held out a glass to Shadow, and he grudgingly took the wine. "I'm afraid that isn't possible. You see, I know you wouldn't have any use for vampire blood, so that means someone had you steal it for them." He walked around the desk and stopped two feet from me to offer me the glass of wine. "I want to know who it is who told you about the vial, and who wants it badly enough to risk you and their identity to get it."

I pushed the glass away from me and shook my head. "Sorry. I

don't divulge my sources."

He smiled. "Pity. I had thought about letting you die first, but I'll have to save you for later."

"Killing another werewolf unless in self-defense is against the code," Shadow reminded him.

Night turned to him and chuckled. "The rules are written by the ones who lead, and the last I looked I led quite a few werewolves."

"That doesn't make you a leader. It merely means you control that many," Shadow shot back.

Night shrugged. "I can see we're getting nowhere with this conversation." He looked to his half dozen thugs who stood in front of the door and jerked his head towards Shadow. "Please escort our guest to the basement and treat him accordingly."

They nodded like a pack of robots rather than werewolves and turned to Shadow. The men moved to surround him. Shadow took a step back and flung the contents of his wine glass at their faces.

I was glad I refused my glass when the men in black clutched their faces and screamed in agony. Steam slipped through their fingers and I saw blood run down their chins and onto the floor. Shadow rushed the group and swung punches left and right. Soon the guards didn't have to worry about their pain because they were knocked out cold. I caught a good glimpse of their faces and saw that the flesh had been burned by some sort of acid.

Night turned to Shadow and snarled at him. "Must I get rid of you myself?" he growled.

Shadow took a defensive stance with his fists outstretched like a boxer. "I would be glad if you did," he challenged him.

A crooked smile slid onto Night's face. He threw down the two glasses of wine and slipped behind me. His arm wrapped around mine and pinned them to my sides while his other hand was pressed against my throat. I felt his fingernails lengthen into claws and dig into my skin.

"I think I won't risk it, and I know you won't risk her," Night commented. He leaned down and pressed a kiss against my temple. "She is quite lovely, isn't she?"

Apparently a penchant to underestimate me ran in the family because I jerked my head back and connected with his face. He cried out in pain as I crushed the bones in his nose. Night let go of me and stumbled back. I jumped onto the desk and dove off the

other side to land neatly beside Shadow.

Night lowered his hands from his bloody nose and glared at us. He pursed his lips together and emitted a whistle that made me cringe. A dozen pairs of feet pounded down the hall and the door burst open to reveal more guards, and more on the way.

"Kill them!" Night screamed.

The guards stepped over their fallen comrades and made to surround us. Shadow and I backed up towards the cabinet.

"I hope you have a plan to get us out of here," I told him.

"Not quite, but this may help," he replied.

Shadow wrapped his arm around my waist and picked me up off the floor. He spun around and hurried up the spiral staircase with me in tow. I looked down between the rungs and watched the guards swarm the bottom of the stairs with Night behind them closer to the door.

We reached the balcony and Shadow made for the door to the library, but three of the werewolves from below knelt down and sprang up. They performed a ten-foot vertical and landed on the part of the balcony in front of us. Our route was blocked behind and in front of us.

Shadow set me down and pushed me behind him. I glared at him and pushed his arm away.

"If I'm going to die, it's not going to be behind anybody," I snapped at him.

Apparently it wasn't my time to die because a pair of bright lights shone through the windows behind the desk. A second later a red convertible careened through the glass and barreled through the desk. Shards of glass and splintered wood flew in all directions, and most of the guards on the ground floor were put out of commission by the debris. Night himself jumped back against the door and avoided any major injuries.

Quinn sat in the driver's seat and leaned his head back to look at us. "I'm not parking illegal just for the fun of it, Detective, so get down here."

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CHAPTER 30

I didn't need to be told twice. I grabbed Shadow's hand and flung us off the balcony railing. We landed with a hard thud in the back seat. Quinn jammed the stick of his car into reverse and slammed his foot on the pedal. The wheels spun out for a few seconds on the hardwood floor before they found traction on the debris. We flew backwards out of the remains of the study and onto the lawn.

I grabbed onto the back of Quinn's chair and stuck my head through the space between the two front seats.

"How'd you find us?" I asked him.

"You're high heels are wired for GPS and sound, now could I drive in peace?" he snapped.

Quinn spun the wheel so we faced the direction of the gate and we flew down the hill. The guards who were still lively jumped from the debris and balcony, and raced after us on all fours. I turned around and watched them transform into full blown werewolves complete with gnashing teeth and bright yellow eyes. They were ugly, and they were gaining on us.

"Faster, Quinn!" I yelled at him.

"Do you want to drive?" he bit back.

"No, I want you to go faster!" I snapped.

We sped past the front of the house where the party-goers gawked at our escape. The werewolf guards put on a burst of speed and lunged at the car. Three of them managed to cling to the trunk. They slammed their clawed hands into the metal and climbed towards us.

"Watch the paint!" Quinn yelled at them as we flew down the hill.

Shadow climbed onto the trunk and swung his fist at the werewolf. The guard ducked and returned the favor with a punch to Shadow's face. They got into a slug-fest while I moved to head off the other two as they made their way towards Quinn and the wheel. One of them climbed onto the side of the car and the other skirted Shadow and his fellow guard.

I looked around for a weapon and found only one: the headrest on top of Quinn's seat.

"What the hell are you doing?" he asked me as I grabbed the headrest.

"Using your headrest to save your head!" I shouted.

I saw movement out of the corner of my eye and spun around with the headrest in my hands. The headrest connected with the face of one of the werewolves. He lost his grip and tumbled off. The other one who was on the side of the car grabbed at me, but I slammed the headrest on his outstretched arm. A snap and howl told me I'd done more damage than I intended. The werewolf clutched his broken arm against his chest and snapped his jaws at me. I shoved the headrest into his jaws and pushed him off the car.

Shadow finally got his clinger off with a good uppercut to the jaw, and the werewolf tumbled onto the ground behind us. We both dropped into the backseat and looked ahead of us. The steel gate lay ahead of us, and it was closed.

"Quinn!" I yelled.

"Hold on!" he replied.

Shadow grabbed the top of my head and pushed me to the car floor with him. We looked up and saw the gate fly over our heads along with a showering of shattered windshield glass. Quinn took a sharp right and bounced us onto the road. We peaked over the back of the rear seat and watched the broken gate disappear from view.

It'd been one hell of a night, but we were safe. Quinn drove down the road at top speed and we were soon in the far less fashionable parts of the city. He slowed down and glanced over his shoulder at us.

"You two in one piece?" he asked us.

"If we were I'd cut myself off," I quipped.

Quinn smiled. "I'll take that as a 'yes.'" His eyes flickered to Shadow and he gave a nod. "A pleasure to finally meet you, Mr. Lowell."

Shadow started at the name and his eyes narrowed. "How do you know-" Quinn waved his hand.

"Don't you werewolves ever ask the right questions?" Quinn wondered. "How I know isn't important, it's that I know and that I'm not going to use it against you." He turned his attention back to me. "I am going to use that info, though, just as long as you have what I asked for."

I pulled the vial from my cleavage and showed it to him. "Yeah, but you're not getting it until I get my disk."

"What disk?" Shadow asked us.

Quinn patted his chest pocket. "The disk that has your life story," he told Shadow.

"If such a disk exists than it belongs to me," Shadow insisted.

"Not when I nearly lost my life to earn it," I snapped at him.

"You don't want to become involved in the history of my life," he warned me.

"I hate to interrupt a lover's quarrel, but I think you two might be missing the more important matters of the moment," Quinn spoke up. "Night looked like he was ready to kill you, and unless my werewolf rules are rusty that's against the code."

I sat back in my seat and crossed my arms over my chest. "These code rules are as binding as a restraining order," I quipped.

"I have an apartment close by where we can hide," Shadow told us. "The garage is only a block away."

"Good, because I think that's as far as this car can go," Quinn commented.

With Shadow's instructions Quinn drove down a block and turned into a wide alley. Double floor brick walls loomed up on either side of us. There was a reinforced garage door to our left with a touch pad on the wall beside it. Shadow hopped out and dialed a few numbers, and the door slid up to show off an unfinished garage with a single light bulb in the ceiling. A door in the far right corner was the only other way of escape. Quinn parked the car inside and Shadow closed the door behind us.

Quinn and I hopped out, and Shadow led us through the door. The attached living quarters were in the same modernist style as Shadow's Bohemian apartment in the upscale neighborhood. The living quarters took up about two thousand square feet and had all the amenities of a modern home. The garage opened onto the kitchen, and to our left was the rest of the house.

Shadow led us into the living room where Quinn turned to me. He pulled out the disk and held it out to me.

"A deal's a deal, Detective," he reminded me.

I handed him the vial and got the disk for my trouble. The case was a little scuffed from our fun, but otherwise the disk looked like it would work.

My plans for the disk were derailed for a moment when I noticed Quinn pop the vial. He leaned his back his head and downed the entire contents in a couple of gulps. Quinn put the cork

back on the mouth and frowned.

"Could have used a couple of fresh pints," he commented.

"Is a dose of vampire's blood good for the heart?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "No, but it'll help me sleep easier during the day knowing no one else will have my blood," he told me.

I raised an eyebrow and pointed at the empty blood vial. "So that was your blood?"

"Ever astute, Detective," he complimented as he raised the vial to level with his face. He peered into the empty vial and frowned. "It was stolen from me a century ago and landed in the claws of that mercenary. I didn't know, and didn't want to know, what he'd do with it, so I had you get it for me."

"And risk my neck for a disk I can't even access," I commented as I looked at the disk.

"I have a computer here you may use," Shadow spoke up.

Quinn and I turned to Shadow in surprise. I held up the disk so he could see it and waved it back and forth.

"You really want me to play this?" I asked him.

"I don't believe I could keep you from the truth forever even if I wanted to," he pointed out.

I snorted. "I wish you would've learned that sooner."

"Some lessons must be learned the hard way," he returned. He stepped aside and swept his arm towards a staircase that led up to the second floor. "If you'd follow me."

I frowned and looked him over. "This isn't one of your tricks to get me into bed, is it?"

"Please don't go into details around me," Quinn quipped.

Shadow shook his head. "No. No more tricks, no more lies, no more secrets. I'll allow you to learn anything you want, starting with that disk."

I studied his face, but finally nodded. "All right, lead the way."

Shadow glanced at Quinn. "Would you mind-" Quinn held up a hand.

"I already know your secrets, and I'm not interested in a re-viewing of the disk," Quinn assured him.

Shadow bowed his head. "All right. You can find some blood packets in the fridge and-"

"Blood? Like human blood?" I spoke up.

"Sheep and chicken, mostly," Shadow told me. "It curbs the cravings of the wolf during the full moon."

"I wouldn't expect a werewolf to have the best vintage, anyway," Quinn commented. He walked over to the couch and made himself comfortable. "Call if you need me, and scream if you want to warn me."

"No one will find us here," Shadow assured him.

"You never can tell with Night," Quinn argued.

"We'll find out later," I interrupted. I looked to Shadow. "Now where's that computer?"

"Follow me," he requested.

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CHAPTER 31

I followed him upstairs to an office with plain white walls, a futon, and a desk with a laptop and cushioned office chair. He walked over and inserted the disk, and I took a seat in the chair. The screen lit up with activity and demanded a user name and password, which Shadow typed in at a speed that I couldn't follow. The computer desktop came up and asked if we wanted to view the contents on the disk.

"I'll leave the rest to you to sort out for yourself," he told me.

He left, and I guided the mouse over to the 'yes' button to view the disk and clicked it. The disk contents popped up and showed folders filled with documents, pictures, transaction reports. You name it, Quinn had somehow gotten a hold of it.

"It pays to live forever. . ." I murmured as I went to the first folder.

It was named 'Current History,' and right then the current was pretty important. I opened the folder and browsed the contents. The first thing that caught my eye was a photo meant to be applied to an ID. I clicked on the photo and the image program enlarged the photo.

My eyes widened and I fell back in my chair. In front of me was a picture of Dr. Thomas Lowell, the man who'd treated me at the hospital and who had once owned the Moonstone. The photo was for his hospital ID, but the name of the file was 'Shadow.' My detective mind hearkened back to the study and Night's comment about my being Shadow's patient. It looked like he was telling the truth.

I leaned forward and scrolled through the rest of the files and documents. It was all there. The fake documents, the comparison in facial structure to the good doctor and Shadow that showed a good match, though not perfect.

Then I stumbled on something odd. It was not one birth certificate, but a half dozen. They all had different names, dates, parents, but the one thing they had in common was that the date of birth was always roughly thirty years apart from each other. I couldn't understand it until I noticed on a file in the main folder named 'Werewolf Myths and Realities - Read This First, Detective.'

I shrugged and clicked it. "Better late than never," I muttered.

The document that came up helped explain the birth certificates. Werewolves weren't just creatures of extraordinary strength and agility. They were demi-gods who lived several lifetimes beyond humans. Their bodies aged at a twelfth the rate as a normal human, if their aging could be distinguished at all. They were nearly immortal, and Shadow had spent all that time and energy on building an empire that covered most of the city, and several parts of the state and country.

I flipped through the folders and gave each of the documents a cursory look. His empire ruled over everything from blackmail and gambling to gaming the municipal bond system to rake in millions, maybe even billions of dollars a year. I leaned forward and clutched my head in my hands as I closed my eyes.

"Damn it. How the hell did this get past us?" I whispered.

"If by 'us' you're referring to the police and administrations, it's because some of them are werewolves," a voice spoke up.

I spun around to find Shadow in the doorway. He leaned against the door frame with his lips pursed tightly together. I glared at him.

"Planted there or were they changed like me?" I questioned him.

"A little of both," he admitted. Shadow pushed off from the doorway and walked over to the desk. He leaned down and studied the contents on the screen. "Quinn is very thorough."

I studied the werewolf's face. "Yeah. He even knows who you are."

A little smile slipped onto Shadow's lips. "I never meant for you to get involved so deeply in my personal affairs."

"You should've thought about that the night those guys attacked your club," I retorted.

He turned to me and his eyes swept over my face. His features were a blank slate I couldn't read. "Would it do me any good to tell you those men were sent by Night?"

I shook my head. "No, because you haven't told me what his story is, or even much of yours." I tapped on the folder that held his hospital ID picture. "Why didn't you tell me who you were when I went to question you about the Moonstone?"

Shadow stood straight and sighed. "Because I still foolishly hoped to keep you from the deeper depths of my aliases. At least

until you had adjusted to the changes in your body. That's why I came to you as I am."

"Yeah, that worked out great," I quipped.

"I see now that I should have been forthcoming with you long before this," he conceded.

I pursed my lips and nodded my head at his body. "How does that work, anyway? You don't look much like the doctor."

"A trick for those werewolves who can change their skeletal structure and hair color without the use of plastic surgery or dye," he explained.

"The surgeon world would hate you, and a lot of scientists would love to see us both on the cutting room table," I quipped.

Shadow backed up and took a seat on the futon. "Immortality does have the allure of bringing out the worst in people who wish to obtain it," he agreed.

"So it's true? Werewolves really don't age?" I asked him.

"It's true," he confirmed.

"So are you really-" I turned to the screen and scrolled a bit. "-a hundred and eighty years old?"

"Give or take five years," he replied.

"And judging by these financial graphs, you must be worth quite a bit," I added.

"Greater than I dare let the world know," he told me. "And I'm willing to share some of that wealth with you," he offered.

"I think I'll pass. There's something more important I want to know." I jerked my thumb at the screen. "I saw a lot of ways to get this curse, but I didn't see any way of breaking it."

"Because there isn't any way," he revealed. "That is, other than the ultimate release. Death."

My heart sank. I looked away from him and ran a hand through my hair. "Damn it. . ." I muttered.

Shadow leaned forward with his arms over his legs. "I may not be able to give you your life back, but I promise I will give you the best life I can."

I snorted. "If that life lasts that long. It looks like I've been dropped into the middle of a turf war between you and that Night guy."

Shadow pursed his lips, but gave a nod. "Yes. With our attempted murder Night has essentially declared war on my faction. It's only a matter of time before more fights break out and the city

plummets into turmoil."

"Quinn's disk doesn't tell me who he is, and you guys acted like father and son, but the roles were reversed," I commented. "So who the hell is he?"

"He isn't my biological child, but I did give him the curse, and among werewolves that could be considered a parent-child relationship," he explained.

I frowned and pointed my finger between us. "That doesn't make us-" He smiled and shook his head.

"No. I would consider you my mate," he admitted.

"Where I come from it's called friends-with-benefits," I quipped.

He raised his eyebrows. "Are we merely friends?"

"Don't push your luck," I warned him. "You're the one who got me into a lot of these messes, remember?"

"And I've promised to get you out of them, and I always keep my promises," he returned.

"But not oaths of marriage. Night said something about a mom, and I didn't hear anything about a divorce," I commented.

A smile slipped onto his lips. "If I didn't know any better I would guess you were jealous," he teased.

"I'm not jealous, I'm thorough, and I don't want to spend all day rummaging through Quinn's file dump on your life to find all the relations who might try to kill both you and me," I countered.

"His 'mother,' as he calls her, is a former mate of mine from when I turned him fifty years ago," Shadow explained. "She and I had a falling out about Night's methods of doing business a dozen years ago and have seen very little of each other since."

"So you're not hiding a harem like your prodigal son?" I asked him.

"No, though it is a common practice among werewolves," he admitted.

"Human trafficking might be popular for werewolves, but it's still illegal where I come from," I quipped.

"Where you come from is the werewolves," he pointed out. "Whether you choose to admit it or not, you are now a part of our society."

I stood and crossed my arms over my chest. "Fine, let's say I accept my being stuck as a werewolf for a really long eternity. What do I do now? Go get a job as a flea picker or fur barber?" I

questioned him.

Shadow smiled. "I don't mean to brag, but I am quite rich and somewhat of a playboy. You could remain with me-" A dark frown graced my lips, "-for the time being," he hurriedly added. "Until the war is over and you find the right occupation that fits your unique skills."

"I think the detective business is all she knows," a voice spoke up. We both looked to the doorway and found Quinn leaning against the frame. There was a smug smile on his face. "Besides, she wouldn't be the first detective to be a werewolf."

"Don't you have a puppy or beautiful woman to drain dry?" I retorted.

"Actually, that last suggestion isn't so awful, and I do feel peckish for a fresher juice," he quipped.

Shadow stood and frowned. "I can't let you leave here. You might-" Quinn held up his hand.

"I'm no Boyscout, but I know how to keep secrets, and keeping this one benefits both of us. Besides, I don't plan on getting caught by Night's men," he replied.

"Then what will you do?" Shadow asked him.

"What I do best. Find information and sell it to the highest bidder," Quinn answered. His eyes flickered to Shadow and a smile slipped onto his pale lips. "And since I know how much you're worth I'm offering my services to you."

Shadow raised an eyebrow. "How can I be sure you won't sell your information to Night?"

Quinn pushed off the door frame and shrugged. "The only way you can be sure of that is if you take my offer now. Otherwise I'll have to find another buyer."

"Then I have no choice but to accept your 'offer,'" Shadow agreed.

"Good. I'll see what I can dig up about Night's latest dealings and get back to you," Quinn promised.

"I have other sources for his movements," Shadow informed him.

Quinn grinned. "You've seen how thorough I can be when the reward's worth the effort. I'm sure I'll dig up something your sources won't find. In the meantime, don't spend all your money in one place."

Quinn slipped away and in a few moments we were alone.

Shadow turned to me.

"Your vampire friend is most peculiar," he commented.

I held up my hands. "Don't blame me for him. He's been that way ever since I met him. Besides, he's got the right idea. What can a girl eat around here?"

Shadow smiled and swept his hand towards the door. "Anything you desire."

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CHAPTER 32

He wasn't kidding. The fridge was stocked with a wide variety of cut pork, hamburger, steaks, lamb chops, chicken, pheasant, duck, and even a whole salmon.

"Your fridge is a vegan's worst nightmare," I told him.

"But the best food for a werewolf," he returned.

I stood in front of the open fridge and Shadow sat on a stool at the short bar that separated the kitchen from the dining room. A cold but cooked leg of chicken caught my eye, and I took it from its leggy brethren and tore a sizable bite from the bone.

"So is this your main hideout or is it that other place you took me to?" I asked him through a mouthful of chicken.

"Neither, though I do prefer the seclusion this apartment offers," he replied.

I moved to stand on the side of the bar opposite him and I leaned over the top. "So what's your story, anyway?" I questioned him.

He raised an eyebrow. "My story? Quinn provided you-" I waved the chicken in front of him.

"I know what Quinn gave me, but I want to hear it from the asses mouth," I insisted.

He shrugged. "I was raised on a small farm in the Midwest, and as a young man I ventured to the cities in the northeast to make my fortune. Unfortunately, fate had something else in mind."

"And you ran into a werewolf," I guessed.

Shadow nodded. "Yes. His intention was to make a meal out of me, but I got the better of him in our fight. He no doubt never expected to meet a farm boy with a silver pen in his breast pocket. I used that to stab him in the chest."

I raised an eyebrow. "What were you doing with a silver pen?"

"My plan was to become a reporter, but instead I became part of the news," he told me. "No one believed my story that the person I killed in self-defense had been a monster, and even I didn't fully believe myself until the next full moon."

"When you transformed," I guessed.

He gave a nod. "Yes. The change made me realize I needed to adjust my plan, so I followed the dead werewolf's trail and found a

small enclave of other cursed people. They taught me what I needed to know, and I went out into the world with the knowledge that, barring some accident or murder, I had a lot of time on my hands."

"As far as empires go, that's not that great of a story," I quipped.

He chuckled. "No, I suppose not, but it's the only one with the whole truth."

"Speaking of truth, is your name really Thomas Sowell?" I wondered.

Shadow shook his head. "No. Just my current alias."

"So what do I call you? Thomas, like Gloria called you?" I asked him.

"I would rather you kept with Shadow. That name suits me better than any other, even my original one," he admitted.

"So which one of those birth certificates had your real name?" I inquired.

"The one that read Ferdinand Finkle," he told me.

I swallowed a bite of chicken that was a little too large for my throat. "You're right, Shadow is a lot better," I choked out.

I set the leg chicken on the counter and coughed on the piece I swallowed. Shadow slipped off the stool and patted me lightly on the back.

"Easy there. I don't want you to die from something as wasteful as chicken," he teased me.

"I can. . .handle myself," I insisted.

My chicken was choked up when Shadow wrapped his arms around me. He leaned down and his soft breath wafted over my ear.

"But I would rather do that," he whispered.

I felt a blush rise in my cheeks and I tried to pull myself out of his grasp, but he held me tight. Shadow pulled my back against his hard, firm chest.

"I don't need the Heimlich," I told him.

I gasped when I felt his sharp teeth nibble on my ear. "No, but it has been some time since you satiated another need."

"I-I don't think that's what we should be focusing on," I stuttered.

He chuckled. "No one will find us here unless I send for them. We're completely alone."

His hands reached up and cupped my breasts in his palms. He massaged my mounds of flesh and ignited a hot fire inside me. I

leaned back and bit my lower lip to keep back the groan.

"Don't fight it," he whispered. "Don't fight me."

He spun me around and pressed our lips together in a hot, possessive kiss. My stubborn refusal melted against the fire of his lust, and my own need for him overtook me. The new feral nature inside of me took control, and we soon found ourselves in the bedroom.

He lay me down on the bed and pressed half of his body over mine. My chest heaved with each excited gasp, and I squirmed beneath the fiery glow in his yellow eyes. His hand swept up my side and his claws cut through my pants and underwear. They fell away in ribbons and revealed the quivering flesh of my ample hip. His fingers toyed with my hip before they slid to my inner thigh. I jerked up when his warm hand slipped into the coarse hair between my legs. His fingers dipped between my hot folds and stroked my sensitive nub.

I lay my head back and closed my eyes to enjoy the full, delicious warmth that washed over me. A thick blanket of lust covered my hot flesh. I reveled in the feel of his touch as his finger excited my passions. Each teasing stroke brought out more of the beast within me, more of the animal that longed to be taken hard and fast. I wanted to be claimed by this man, this monster, this lover, to be only his for this night and all the nights after it.

"More," I groaned.

He chuckled and pressed hot, teasing kisses down my neck that intensified the passion that grew inside me. I clutched the sheets and bent to his will as my hips thrust with his strokes. My body longed for us to be one, to know each other as only lovers could know each other. Every moment we were separated was an agony to my tense, hot body.

He raised himself onto his arms and looked down at me with a feral grin. He tore open my shirt and revealed my pert, swollen breasts trapped in my tight bra. They heaved up and down as the lust threatened to consume me. He cupped my breasts in his hands and massaged them. I leaned into his touch, but it didn't satisfy the desire inside me

"Please," I begged.

His hot lips brushed against my ear.

"Please what?" he asked me.

"Please take me," I pleaded.

"Will you know no other?" he returned.

I squirmed beneath him, but his hand moved down and pressed my hip to the bed.

"Please," I choked out.

"Swear it," he demanded.

I licked my wet lips with my tongue and panted for breath. "No other," I swore. "I only want you." A wave of delicious need washed over me and filled my body with lustful want. I arched my back and groaned. "Please give me all of you."

His voice was husky and thick with his own need. "As you wish."

He tore off his own clothes and threw them aside. My bra soon followed, and he parted my legs and settled himself between them. I moaned as he slid deep into my wet, welcoming core. My walls massaged his thick, pulsing member. He grunted and thrust deep inside me.

"Yes," he hissed.

"Oh god," I groaned.

I clutched onto him as we performed the dance of lovers. Each of his strokes brought me satisfaction and frustration. I craved every thrilling tremor of pleasure that ran through me, but it wasn't enough. My lustful body and mind ached for completion, for the bliss that awaited lovers at the climax of their union.

I grasped his upper arms and arched my back. "Deeper," I begged. "Faster."

He grunted and penetrated me faster and harder. His strokes rubbed against my clit and sent hot flashes of pleasure through me.

I felt a change come over me, the transformation from human to some wild thing. My hands lengthened and my hips widened. Fur sprouted over my body and my tense muscles stretched and thickened. My breasts swelled and fell over my chest in thick mounds of rippling, sweat-soaked flesh. My new body was sensitive to the touches of my mate as we rutted atop the sheets.

His grunts turned to low, deep growls that echoed off the walls of the room. My soft moans joined him and our sensual chorus only heightened our lust. My lover's thick arms wrapped around me and our fur brushed against one another as he, too, transformed into a creature of wild, lustful desire. His manhood swelled and deepened inside me. He penetrated me with faster and deeper strokes. Each penetration demanded I give in to his will, and I allowed myself to

fall into the hot, sensual, wild nature that he'd given to me.

"Yes. Oh god, yes," I groaned. I clutched onto him and pressed my large, swollen breasts against the thick muscles of his chest. The friction between our bodies was agonizingly wonderful. "More. Please more. Never stop. Oh god, take me. Make me yours."

"Mine," he growled. His possessive word and tone only heightened the lustful abandon inside me.

"Yours. Only yours," I chanted. I felt the reverberations of orgasm sweep over me. My eyes opened wide and I panted for air. "Oh god, yes. Yes! Yes! Yes!"

My body spasmed with the sweeping pleasures of orgasm. I twitched beneath my mate as he continued to thrust into me. My wild pleasure was stretched to the limits of exhaustion before he finally stiffened and spilled into me.

A few more moments and he collapsed beside me. His arms pulled me close to his chest and I heard the hard patter of his beating heart. I smiled and nuzzled my cheek against his chest. He reached up and petted my hair. An unbidden murmur of pleasure escaped my lips. He chuckled.

"Care for an encore?" he teased.

"Only in my dreams," I murmured as I slipped into a deep, well-earned sleep.

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CHAPTER 33

I didn't know Marge's cooking from a four-course French dinner until the next morning. The bed bounced, and I creaked open my eyes to see Shadow stand beside the bed. He was completely naked, but was solving that non-problem with a pair of pants and a shirt.

"Where are you going?" I murmured.

"I'm expecting a guest within the hour," he explained. He slid his shirt over his head and turned to me with his wicked grin. "It's someone you know."

I sat up and frowned. "Quinn?" I guessed.

He shook his head. "No."

"It's not Baldwin, is it?" I wondered.

Shadow chuckled. "No, and I'll leave it as a mystery for you to solve," he added as he finished his dressing and strode towards the door. "Breakfast will be served soon. I hope you're hungry."

"Starving," I answered as I flung aside the sheets. Shadow's eyes swept over my naked form and his lips curled back in an appreciative grin. I wrapped the covers over me again and glared at him. "Do you mind?" I snapped.

"Not at all. I would be glad to stand here," he told me.

I snapped my finger at the door. "Out."

He chuckled and bowed his head. "As you wish."

Shadow slipped from the room like his namesake and I pulled on some of his clothes. In a few minutes I stepped into the main area of the large apartment and the smell of eggs and bacon wafted to my nose. There was an island in the kitchen with stools, and I took one of those to watch Shadow cook bacon.

"So got any plans for dealing with your son?" I asked him. Shadow froze over the bacon and shut his eyes. I sighed and ran a hand through my wild hair. "Sorry. Me and my big, blunt mouth."

Shadow shook his head and got on with the cooking. "No, it's my fault. I really should accept the fact that my son has to be dealt with, but running was always easier."

"But no more running now," I commented.

He flipped the sizzling slices of pig and a sad smile slipped onto his lips. "No, no more running."

"So do you have a plan?" I wondered.

"That depends on what my informant brings me," he replied. Shadow slipped the bacon onto two plates and turned to me. He slipped one in front of me and another in front of the stool he took. "His information will give us a full view of the situation."

I raised an eyebrow. "You mean him killing us last night wasn't enough?"

Shadow picked up a piece of bacon and studied the slice. "The difficulty with the attack is it's our word against his."

"So the werewolf courts can't sniff out the truth?" I guessed.

He took a bite of the bacon and shook his head. "No. Night will have scrubbed the house clean last night and used the party and the attack as a cover for his actions. He may also bring charges against us for escaping with your vampire friend."

I leaned back and held up my hands. "He's an acquaintance, not a friend. You've got a closer relationship with him by assigning him to your detail."

Shadow put down the rest of his bacon and frowned at his full plate. "Yes. I wonder if I wasn't hasty in allowing him to leave."

I set my elbows on the table and shrugged. "If there's one thing I've learned about Quinn is that he's reliable. A little hard to deal with, but reliable."

"Let's hope you're-" A knock on the door interrupted our conversation. A sly smile slipped onto Shadow's lips and he nodded at the door that led to the garage. "Care to do the honors?" he invited me.

I frowned and half-turned to the door. I studied it for a moment before my eyes flickered back to Shadow. "Do I really want to know?"

"You're not afraid to meet an old friend, are you, Detective Selena?" he teased.

"I've had some old acquaintances try to kill me lately, so yeah, I'm a little nervous," I retorted.

He chuckled and shook his head. "You won't find unsafe quarters with this gentleman." There came another knock, and this one was more impatient.

"Fine, I'll answer it," I grudgingly agreed.

I hopped off my stool and stalked over to the door. My nose picked up a scent I couldn't quite place, something like musk and paperwork. I swung open the door and found myself staring at a

very familiar person.

"Chief?" I squeaked.

It was indeed the police chief of my precinct. He stood in the doorway in plain clothes. One whiff of his body told me he'd added a bit of cologne to his person that masked his natural scent, but wasn't overpowering. There was a yellow folder tucked under one arm. Shadow came up to me and set a hand on my shoulder.

"Good morning, Chief," Shadow greeted my former boss.

"'Morning," the Chief replied as he stepped inside and nodded his head at me. "Detective," he replied. He turned his attention to Shadow and handed over the folder. "Here's what you wanted. The latest on Night's dealings. You were right about him. He's making a move to not only muscle in on your territory but humans, too."

I looked the Chief over and raised an eyebrow at the Chief. "You're a werewolf, too?" I asked him.

"Not exactly," Shadow spoke up as he opened the folder and flipped through a few pages. "He's more of an informer. I keep the streets clean of some crime, and he keeps me in the know about investigations in which I have an interest."

"But only if you can keep your prodigal son under control," the Chief reminded him.

"So you knew about werewolves the entire time?" I questioned my former boss.

He grinned at me. "Welcome to the club, Detective."

"Why the hell didn't you tell me?" I growled at him.

"Rules are rules," he pointed out.

"And it seems Night is intent on breaking them all," Shadow commented as his eyes scanned the documents.

I held up a hand. "Wait a sec. If you knew about werewolves then why did you have that creep Baldwin on the force?"

The Chief frowned. "I wasn't aware of his true nature, or that he was a plant sent in by Night."

"Nobody's perfect," Shadow agreed. He lifted his eyes and shut the folder. "This will help a great deal. Thank you."

"Don't thank me. Get that damn son of yours off the streets, and this time for good," the Chief demanded.

Shadow pursed his lips, but bowed his head. "I understand. I'll see what I can do."

"You'd better." The Chief turned to me and held out his hand. "You may not believe me when I say anything, but I was glad to

have you on the force."

I frowned and crossed my arms over my chest. "I don't plan on giving up my badge just yet, Chief. If Baldwin could get the job done as some sort of monster-"

"He was a ghoul," Shadow reminded me.

"Whatever he was he could get the job done, and when all this mess is done I plan on getting back to my desk," I swore to my boss.

The Chief dropped his hand but grinned at me. "I'm glad to hear that, Detective, and good luck on getting through this mess. There's a small war brewing out there, and it'll take all my resources to keep it under wraps."

"We'll see what we can do," Shadow repeated.

"You do that, and good luck to you both," the Chief answered.

He nodded to us, turned and left through the garage door. Shadow shut the entrance and turned back to the living area. He paced a few feet before he stopped and cupped his chin in one hand.

"Damn. . ." I heard him mutter.

"That bad?" I wondered.

He turned to me with pursed lips and worried eyes. "Worse. Night means to start a war with the humans, and he means to start it within the week."

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CHAPTER 34

"What do you mean a war?" I asked him.

"Night intends to physically move into my parts of the city and those controlled by neither of us, and take them by force," he explained to me.

"And what are your guys ordered to do if that happens?" I continued.

"To protect my assets without revealing the truth about werewolves or my influence to humans." Shadow took a seat on the arm of a plush chair and shook his head. "Unfortunately, my rules create a handicap for those under my influence."

"And Night isn't going to hold to that handicap," I guessed.

Shadow gave a nod. "Correct. All of your Chief's vast sources inform us that Night will do whatever it takes to control the city, even if that means revealing werewolves."

I nodded at the folder in his lap. "Is that what's in the folder?" I wondered.

He held it out to me and I took it. "Mostly the financial movements of Night's assets," he told me.

I opened the folder and saw lines and lines of transactions with categories like for drug deals, blackmailing, extortion, a few murders, and a block of rows for legal dealings like loans. The total wasn't easy to add up, but I guessed it was a couple tens of millions of dollars.

"So he's going to use this money to pay for his private army?" I guessed.

"Most likely," Shadow agreed.

"And how the hell will it help him to show the whole world that werewolves exist?" I pointed out.

"Not the whole world, but many in the city," Shadow corrected me.

I snorted. "Like videos and pictures of werewolves are going to be kept off the internet."

"He intends to take out parts of the communication during his siege of the city," Shadow informed me.

I shut the folder and tucked it under one arm. "All right, so what's our next move?"

He raised an eyebrow. "'Our?'" he repeated.

I crossed my arms over my chest and raised an eyebrow. "You think I'm just going to sit here while you go get yourself killed?"

"I wasn't planning on-" I held up a hand.

"Even the best laid plans go awry, so I'm coming with you," I insisted.

He shook his head. "You're not trained with your werewolf powers. You'll only get yourself killed."

"Then give me something to pack," I suggested.

"I don't think I follow," he replied.

I dropped my arms and patted my right hip. "I need a gun. I may be a werewolf-in-training, but I already have my detective creds. Give me a gun with some silver bullets and I'll take care of Night's men."

"It will be dangerous," he warned me.

I snorted. "So is every day being a detective, but I won't complain."

Shadow chuckled. "All right, if you insist. Follow me."

Shadow led me into the bedroom and over to the closet. He slid open the door, brushed aside the clothes that hung on the hangers, and stepped inside. There was a shelf above his head, and he reached into the farthest left corner and pressed something beneath the shelf. The wall slid out and then apart to reveal an assortment of mounted guns. There was a small shelf beneath the guns that was stacked three boxes deep with ammo.

"Not bad," I complimented him as moved to stand beside him.

"I aim to please," he replied.

I picked up a box of ammo. It was a plain black box, and opening the top revealed clips that lay on their sides stacked one on top of the other. "These all silver?" I asked him.

"Every one. There's a small fortune here," he assured me.

"Good because we've got a small army to decimate," I quipped.

"We may not be able to be that blunt," he warned me.

I snatched a black handgun and slid a half dozen ammo boxes towards me. "Why not? He wasn't exactly hospitable to us last night," I reminded him.

"There are rules we must-" I spun around and pressed the gun against his nose.

"Night doesn't follow the rules, at least not the one about Thou Shalt Not Kill," I pointed out. I dropped the gun and crossed my

arms over my chest. "That means we need to be willing to at least bend the rules a little, and that includes being blunt about what we aim to do."

He raised an eyebrow. "And that is?"

I shrugged. "Either convince him to donate his loot to charity and go into a convent, or try to start a war and have us stop him." I looked into Shadow's eyes with a firm gaze. "Even if that means killing him."

Shadow sighed, but gave a nod. "You may be-" Ding-dong.

I looked around us. "You have a front door?" I asked him.

"It's the garage. Someone is here," he told me.

Shadow strode past me and into the main living space. I tucked my gun in the back waistband of my jeans and followed, and he led me out into the garage. Quinn's car was gone so the place was empty. Shadow walked over to the door on the right-hand side of the garage and stopped in front of it. He lifted his nose and sniffed the air. I frowned, but did the same. I wrinkled my nose.

"Somebody's wearing too much perfume," I commented.

"It's just the right amount to dazzle a male wolf, and if you open the door I'll dazzle you with my eyes," a female voice commented from the other side of the door.

Shadow pursed his lips, but opened the door. On the threshold stood a woman of thirty in a tight blue dress not unlike the red prison I'd worn the previous night. She had a matching handbag clutched in her hands in front of her that sparkled with jewels, and a white boa of fox fur wrapped around her neck. The woman wore painful high-heels, but walked like she was on Cloud Nine. She smiled at us and her teeth were so white they almost blinded me.

"Good morning, sleepy heads," she teased as she pushed her way past Shadow. She turned to me and held out her hand. "You must be Shadow's new toy."

It didn't take a genius to figure out this woman had all the snake-like charm of Night, and was thus related to him. That meant this was Shadow's ex-mate.

I slapped a smile on my face and shook her hand. "And you must be his old luggage," I retorted.

The woman pulled her hand away and her smile grew strained. She turned her eyes to Shadow. "What a charming little viper you have here," the woman commented.

Shadow frowned back at her. "How did you find this place,

Dawn?"

She chuckled and strode around the empty garage. "You're not the only one who has competent trackers, darling," she explained.

"But you're not one of them," he retorted.

Dawn paused and looked over her shoulder with a frown on her face. "If you must know I heard from a little pale night bird. He's very full of information."

I froze. There was only one 'pale night bird' who knew about this location. He'd sold us out. I glanced at Shadow. His lips were pursed tight and his eyes held anger, but he didn't betray his complete feelings.

"If that's the case then we don't have time to chit-chat," Shadow informed her.

Dawn stopped a few yards from us and spun on her heels to face us. "But I haven't come here for chit-chat. Night tells me you didn't behave very well at his party last night."

I snorted. "He wasn't exactly the model host himself."

Her eyes flickered to me and her eyebrows crashed down. "I know you're Shadow's new toy, but I don't think I caught your name."

I folded my arms across my chest and smiled. "It's Dusk."

She raised an eyebrow. "What a strange name."

"It means I'm standing between Shadow and Night, and I won't let Dawn get in the way," I quipped.

Shadow choked on his laugh, but Dawn failed to see the humor. Her eyes hardened and she glanced at Shadow. "An amusing woman you have here, but I didn't come here to play word games. What are your intentions towards our son?"

"We mean to stop him," Shadow told her.

Dawn rolled her eyes. "That old feud again? Why don't you just give him your share and buy an island?"

Shadow stalked up to her and grabbed her arm. "This isn't one of those petty squabbles we have between us, Dawn. Night means to expose us all to the humans."

She shrugged out of his hold and crossed her arms over her chest. "I know what he intends to do, and I support him completely."

Shadow's eyes narrowed. "Then you need to leave."

A sly grin slipped onto her lips. "And miss the party?" His eyes widened, and she laughed and stepped back. "Did you think I would

let you ruin our son's chance at ruling this city? Who would own this town but him? You?" She looked him up and down, and sneered. "You're just an old wolf in new clothing and-" she glanced past him and at me, "-with something new wrapped around his-"

I whipped out the gun so fast even I didn't see my arm, and stepped forward and pressed the barrel against her forehead.

"Shadow said you need to leave, so leave," I growled.

I didn't get a chance to hear Dawn's snide remark before Shadow wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me towards the house. Something loud banged on the garage door and the indent of an elbow appeared in the entrance. Dawn's cavalry was here.

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CHAPTER 35

Dawn tilted back her head and laughed.

"You think you can run away from him? Night owns everything and everyone!" she crowed.

My reply was to fire off a couple of shots before we disappeared into the house. Dawn screamed and dove to the ground right in the middle of a nice oil pile Quinn had graciously left. I'd have to thank him later, and then stake him.

Shadow put me down in the house and grabbed my free hand. He pulled me towards the rear bedroom just as I heard the garage door bust open. We slipped into the bedroom and shut the door behind us as werewolves spilled into the house. Shadow shoved the bed in front of the door and moved over to the far corner past the bed. He leapt the eight feet and grabbed a small white knob in the white ceiling. When he came down the knob went with him, and so did a trap door concealed beneath several layers of paint. A short ladder sprang down for my werewolf rookie self to climb.

"Climb up," he ordered me.

"I hope you more to your plan than getting stuck in an attic," I quipped as I followed his directions.

"We'll see," he answered.

The attic was sloped and five feet tall in the best of places. My short height didn't have too much problem, but Shadow had to stoop. He took the lead and led me down the narrow beam that sat along the roof joints to the far end of the house. We heard gnashing teeth and the crashing of furniture beneath us.

"You idiots! He's up there!" Dawn screamed.

Furry, clawed hands punched holes in the floor of the attic and grabbed at us. One wrapped around Shadow's ankle and pulled him to the floor, but the beams stopped Shadow from falling through. I aimed my gun and fired off a couple of shots into the hand. The skin sizzled at the impact of cursed flesh and silver. The werewolf yelped and yanked its hand back. One down, but that left a couple dozen pairs to go.

They popped up like bad weeds. Shadow stomped on them and I shot them, but they tore the attic floor to pieces. The sheets lost their grip on the ceiling and toppled to the ground floor. We went

with the sheet rock and landed on top of the wolves. They jumped us and my gun was torn away. Shadow partially transformed and tore into our enemies. He sent a half dozen werewolves to some early graves, but they piled on top of him. The wolves pulled our arms behind our backs and slammed our faces into the floor.

I got a good look at a pair of high heels before I heard Dawn's voice above us.

"I tried to convince you, but you just had to be difficult," she commented.

"You would know," I growled.

Dawn put one of her heels against the middle of my back and pressed into mine spine. I ground my teeth together, but a small cry escaped my lips.

"Stop it!" Shadow shouted.

Dawn pulled her foot off me, but she also chuckled. "So cute how you're trying to be brave. I'd have more fun with your new toy myself, but Night is just dying to see you two again."

"I wish. . ." I murmured.

Dawn gave me a good kick in the side with her pointed shoe for my mouth. "Shut your mouth, whore," she snapped. "And keep them shut, boys."

The werewolves pulled us to our feet and shoved clothes into our faces. I inhaled a faint whiff of a pungent smell that made the world spin before it knocked me out.

The next I knew I woke up with a tight sensation around my wrists and ankles. My arms were pulled behind the chair, and my ankles were bound to the legs. I unconsciously tried to pull, but the bindings wouldn't budge. My eyes fluttered open and I found myself staring at a blank cell with cement walls and a large wattage bulb over our heads. The room was maybe ten by ten feet without any windows and only one door.

The 'our' was because Shadow was with me. We sat shoulder to shoulder on a pair of rickety old wooden chairs with him on my left. The four legs of the chairs were bolted to the concrete floor. Another wooden chair sat in front of us and faced ours, but its legs weren't bolted.

Shadow was wide awake and glared at the metal door in front of us. It was shut, but his nostrils flared and his eyes narrowed like

he expected the devil himself to enter. Turns out he wasn't far off.

"Where are we?" I asked him.

My whisper echoed around the chamber. There was a slight movement above us, and I noticed a pair of cameras in the front corners of the room. They swiveled on their long necks and didn't miss a point in the room. I didn't doubt the two corners behind us had the same pair.

"One of Night's interrogation rooms," he replied.

"Any idea how to get out of here?" I inquired.

He shook his head. "We don't."

I frowned. "Seriously? You're just going to give up that easily?"

"No one escapes these rooms," Shadow told me.

"There's a first time for everything," I insisted.

He nodded at the walls in front of us. "The walls are three feet thick. The door is two feet thick, and the center is lined with silver. The cameras pick up on every movement and cover the entire room. There is no way to escape.

I pursed my lips, but didn't argue. How could I? He'd made a pretty compelling argument that the room was impenetrable and our only hope of escape was actually release.

My ears picked up on a faint sound outside the door, and the heavy metal entrance swung open. There was a bare concrete hallway outside our small world without light or any further hope of escape.

Night stepped inside with two of his transformed goon werewolves and another familiar face. Quinn.

"You," I hissed at Quinn.

The vampire leaned against the door frame and grinned. "Detective," he greeted me.

I tried to lung at him, but the chains around my ankles and wrists held me firm. The bolted chair only budged a half inch.

"Come a little closer so I can give you the greeting you deserve," I dared him.

He closed his eyes and shook his head. "I know you too well, Detective."

"Refrain from your idle chat," Night ordered us as he plopped into the seat in front of us. He crossed his legs and folded his hands into his lap. A sly smile danced across his lips as his eyes fell on Shadow. "Your new plaything seems to be quite the liability, Father. I never thought I would succeed in getting you down here again."

"Only you would consider a mate a plaything," Shadow snapped.

Night shrugged. "Sticks and stones, Father, though I have something a little more substantial in response." He scooted forward so he sat on the edge of the chair and leaned forward so his face was only six inches from Shadow's. He lowered his voice and slowed his words. "You see, that information you had your human lackey fetch was a little wrong. I don't intend to control the city within the next week. I intend to solidify my control tonight."

"You're a fool if you believe you can conquer an entire city without a single picture escaping the boundaries of your power," Shadow told him.

Night chuckled and leaned away from Shadow. "Who told you I only intend to conquer one city?" Shadow's eyes widened, and Night nodded. "That's right, dear Father. While you squandered your time in this ruin of a concrete jungle I expanded my horizons, so to speak. I intend to enforce my rule of half the cities that are controlled by werewolves."

Shadow's eyes narrowed and his eyebrows crashed down. "You're insane," he commented.

Night grinned and stood. "I can see we won't find any common ground. You're the old rule, and I'm the new, and I'm afraid what's old must go." He turned to Quinn and one of the werewolves. "I believe you asked for the honors of finishing them off?" he asked our old companion.

Quinn pushed off from the doorway and nodded. "Yeah. Werewolf blood is a delicacy for me."

The pair of werewolf guards cast wary eyes on Quinn and stepped away from the vampire.

Night merely sneered at him. "Just don't get any ideas for those under me, or myself."

Quinn held up his hands. "I won't indulge too much of a good thing," he assured him.

"Good," Night replied. He strode towards the door and paused beside Quinn. Night half-glanced over his shoulder at us and leaned towards the vampire. His sly smile had returned and his eyes glittered with a golden hue I didn't like. "But don't let them go too quickly."

Quinn smiled. "I'll see what I can do."

Night returned his full attention to the vampire. "You do that,

and I'll keep these two with you to ensure you do." He glanced at the pair of werewolves. "Remain in here until the deed is done." They bowed their heads, and Night turned around to face us. "Au revoir, Father. Thanks for the gift, and I'll see you in hell."

"You first," Shadow retorted.

Night chuckled. "I don't think that will happen. Goodbye."

He left the room and shut the door securely behind him. We were trapped.

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Quinn slipped into the seat in front of us and grinned at us. "Imagine meeting you two here," he commented.

I growled and strained against my bonds. "You set us up!" I snapped.

He shrugged. "I prefer to call it a re-alignment of alliances, but if you want to be that blunt."

"I want to be more than that," I retorted.

Quinn shook his head. "I'm afraid that won't be necessary. However-" He glanced over his shoulder at the pair of werewolves who stood on either side of the door. "Don't you two have somewhere better to be?"

The eyes of the werewolves narrowed and they glanced at each other. One of them turned back to Quinn.

"We were told-"

Quinn jerked his head towards the cameras in the corners of the ceiling. "I know what you were told, but I've got enough peeping eyes. Besides-" A slow grin spread across his face and revealed his long fangs, "-you wouldn't want me to 'accidentally' involve you in my meal, would you?"

The interrupted werewolf scowled at him. "Disobeying Mr. Night is worse," he argued.

Quinn sighed and stood. "All right, but I did warn you."

Quinn walked around Shadow and me to our backs. I cringed when I felt his cold fingers against the veins in my wrists, but his adept fingers worked away at my bindings until I felt the thick metal chains fall off me. They clattered to the floor, and I turned and frowned at Quinn. Quinn grinned back at me.

"You wouldn't believe how cheap Night is," he whispered to me. I tilted my head to one side and furrowed my brow.

"What the hell are you doing?" one of the werewolves snapped.

Quinn turned his attention to the guard. "I like my food free-range," he replied as he stepped over to Shadow's chair. In a thrice Shadow's wrist bindings dropped to the floor.

"Stop that!" the guard ordered him.

"Make me," Quinn retorted.

The pair of werewolves snarled and lunged forward. Shadow

tore off his ankle bindings and was in time to catch one of the werewolves in mid-leap. He swung the guard over his head and threw him head-first into the wall. I heard a hard crunch as his skull caved in.

Quinn grabbed the back of my chair and tore the legs from its bolted feet. He pulled both out of the way and the second guard slammed himself into the wall. The werewolf slid down the wall and joined his companion on the floor. Quinn put me back on the floor.

I slipped my chain leggings off the leg and swung around. My fist connected with the side of Quinn's face, and he stumbled into the wall. He rubbed his cheek and grinned at me.

"Your reflexes have improved, Detective," he complimented.

"Wait until I get at the rest of you," I growled.

"I admit I deserved the hit, but the rest won't be necessary. I'm on your side," he assured me.

"Then why did you tell Night where we were?" Shadow questioned him.

"Did you have a better plan for getting close to him?" Quinn pointed out.

"No, but you could have brought us into the plan," I argued.

He chuckled. "I wasn't going to take the risk that you two were good actors."

"We will have to continue this conversation for another time," Shadow spoke up. He nodded at the cameras. "They no doubt know of your betrayal."

"I've planned for that, too," Quinn assured us as he strode over to the fallen werewolves.

"The door's the other way," I reminded him.

"It is, but it can't be opened on the inside," he informed me.

Quinn grabbed he dead one by the collar and tossed him out of the way before he stooped close to the floor. I noticed the werewolf's blood pooled at a particular point on the floor. Quinn scraped his hand through the blood before his fingers caught on an invisible crack. He burrowed his fingernails into the crack and tossed his hand up to reveal a trap door. A ladder led into the dark depths of a deep hole.

He turned to us with a smile and gestured at the opening. His fingers dripped with blood. "Ladies first."

Shadow strode past me and knelt beside the opening. He took

a whiff and wrinkled his nose. "The sewers?" he guessed.

Quinn shook his head. "No, the bodies. These trap doors are where they dump those who don't talk, or those whom they lie to and execute anyway."

The men straightened and whipped their heads to the door. My ears picked up on a faint sound in the hallway.

"Company's coming," Quinn commented.

"Let's disappoint them," Shadow added.

He dove into the hole and Quinn waved his hand at me. "Coming, Detective?" he asked me.

"Like I'd leave you two alone to get yourselves killed," I quipped as I hurried to the trap door.

I had my feet into the hole when Quinn set his hand on my shoulder and opened the palm of his other hand. There was my old gun, the one I'd dropped so long ago. I blinked at the gun and looked up into Quinn's face.

"How'd you find it?" I wondered.

He grinned back at me and shoved the gun into my hands. "Stop asking the wrong questions, and start asking the right ones," he teased. "It's not important that I found it, but that I modified the ammunition. Don't waste those silver bullets. They cost a fortune, and those things work against vampires, too."

I smiled and tucked the gun into the waist of my pants. "I can't make any guarantees."

"Then shoot when I'm behind you," he requested.

The door swung open and slammed against the inner wall. A hoard of werewolves barged in and raced at us. I pulled the gun from my waist and slammed off a couple shots. The bullets hit their mark and the first wave dropped to the ground. The other werewolves retreated into the hallway.

"Get down here!" Shadow yelled.

"Coming!" I called back.

I climbed down the hole and Quinn was close above me. We dropped onto a five-foot wide cobblestone walkway interrupted every ten feet by a grate along the right-hand side. The space was pitch black except for the light through the open trap door, but all of our eyes adjusted. Quinn's even glowed bright red in the dark, and Shadow and mine were yellow.

In front of the ladder was a long river of sludge, the sewers Shadow had guessed. The brown water was five feet deep and

flowed at a good clip. On either side of us and in the ceiling were a dozen closed hatches from other interrogation rooms. Across from us was another walkway, but no ladder. The roof was curved like a tunnel and stretched into the distance on our left and right.

The grotesque finish to the sewers was the long wall behind and on either side of us. There sat the remains of Night's countless victims. There were skeletons, partially deteriorated bodies, and a few fresh ones with lifeless eyes. They leaned against the brick wall, lay slumped over one another's laps, or were stacked in tall bone piles that inched their way towards the edge of the water.

The light above us was covered by bodies as the werewolves appeared at the hatch opening. A spray of bullets rained down on us. Shadow grabbed me around the waist and pulled me out of the line of fire and onto the ground. Quinn dove to the left.

Our vampire companion landed on his feet eight feet off from us and jerked his head towards our left. "This way!" he ordered us.

We scrambled to our feet and rushed after him. The cobblestone walkway seemed to go on forever, but we didn't have that much time. The werewolves behind us had the threat of death over their heads if they failed to catch us and had the advantage of not having my slow ass that dragged down our group.

We came to a passage on our left and Quinn turned, but not left. He dove into the sewer sludge on our right and disappeared into the sludge for a moment before he popped up beneath us under the grate.

He pointed at the side passage. "Go in there and have your gun ready, Detective," he hissed at us.

Shadow pulled me into the side passage. We pressed our backs against the wall and listened to the clack of werewolf claws race towards us. My hand was steady as I pressed the top of my gun against my chest. Shadow stood between me and the corner, and I noticed his features and hands changed to less man and more wolf.

The werewolves arrived at our position and paused for only a moment to verify our scent. That moment was enough for Quinn to break through the metal grate with his bare hands and grab the ankles from two different wolves. They let out a pair of yelps before he pulled them into the water.

The distraction was our cue, and Shadow and I jumped into the middle of their confused group. Shadow tore into them while I fired off some damn accurate shots. The wolves dropped like flies

until we were the only ones standing. Quinn surfaced from the muck, but the two werewolves he'd grabbed didn't.

Our filthy vampire friend climbed out of the sewage and frowned at Shadow.

"Your bill just went up," Quinn warned him.

Shadow grinned. "I'll risk it."

"Be careful what you say. We're not done yet," Quinn warned him. He nodded at the passage in which we'd hidden. "We go that way. Fortunately, there aren't any cameras so they might not guess we're stupid enough to strike them head-on."

Shadow half-turned to the passage and glanced back at Quinn. "How do you know about this place?" he asked the vampire.

"I told you I had information that none of your other contacts could give you," Quinn reminded him.

"What the hell are we beneath, anyway?" I spoke up.

"Night's estate," Quinn told me. "The interrogation rooms are beneath the garage near the parking lot and this way leads to the house."

I frowned. "Who in their right mind would have the sewer run under their property?"

"Someone with Night's mind who wanted to keep secrets, but we must hurry," Shadow spoke up. "There's no telling when more werewolves will arrive."

Quinn strode towards the passage. "Then follow me and try to keep up."

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Quinn guided us down the passage towards the house. It was no picnic being behind someone who smelled like a garbage treatment plant. I sidled up to Shadow.

"So figured out what to do about Night?" I whispered to him.

Shadow pursed his lips, but gave a nod. "Yes. We must kill him."

"Doesn't that sound a little harsh?" I pointed out. "Isn't there some sort of jail we can send him to? We've got enough bodies to bury him for years."

"You don't send those types of people to jail. You kill them," Quinn commented.

"He's not a person, he's a werewolf," I reminded him.

"Then he must be put down," Shadow rephrased. "Either way we can't allow him to use his influence to free himself for even a minute. The consequences would be too dangerous."

"So who's going to pull the trigger?" I wondered.

Shadow looked straight ahead and pursed his lips. "I will," he offered.

The passage ran for a hundred yards, and our fast pace meant the conversation ended there. The tunnel stopped at thick metal door that slid into the wall with a keypad on the wall beside it in which to enter a code.

"Do you know the code?" Shadow asked Quinn.

Quinn frowned and shook his head. "This is one bit of information I don't have. The schematics and my sources didn't say anything about this door."

"Then step aside," I ordered as I pushed to the front of our little group.

"There's no use dusting for fingerprints, Detective," Quinn warned me. "Night's probably taken care of-" I raised my gun and the men scuttled back.

A shot ran out and the bullet embedded itself into the machinery. The panel sizzled and sparked, and the door slid open an inch. I turned to the men and raised the gun beside my face.

"You were saying?" I asked Quinn.

"I was saying that your blunt fashion suits you," Quinn

finished.

Shadow tilted his head back and glared at the ceiling. "Save the compliments for later. The shot set off the alarms in the house."

I looked to Quinn and jerked the barrel of my gun at the crack in the doorway. "Lead the way."

Quinn stepped forward and shoved his lanky hands into the hole. He shoved the door open and revealed a wine cellar. There were rows upon rows of stacked bottles and barrels of expensive wine. The walls of the large room were earthen and the air had a dry quality to it. A flight of wooden stairs twenty yards off climbed the wall opposite us and led to a door. Our only obstacles out of the cellar were the distance, and the swarm of werewolves who poured from the door.

Fortunate for us that at their heels came Night. His face was red and he cracked a finger at us.

"Kill them, and don't spoil the wine!" he shouted at his men.

They jumped over the banister of the steps and down the stairs towards us.

"Separate!" Shadow shouted.

We broke into three directions. Quinn and I took the left and right, and Shadow jumped onto the top of the wine racks and barrels. The werewolves followed close at our heels which was just fine by me. I turned around and shot point-blank into their faces. They dropped to the dusty floor and transformed back into their human selves. Quinn grabbed the bottles and used them like knives to slice open his pursuers. Shadow had a less gory way of dealing with his foes; he got around them and snapped their necks.

Quinn's wanton destruction of the booze supply got Night to the bottom of the stairs. The stream of werewolves ran thin, and only a half dozen stayed around Night to protect him. Shadow took advantage of the chaos to jump off the racks, and in so doing he started a chain reaction of toppling wooden shelves. The whole place was awash with shattered bottles, broken caskets, and splashing wine.

"Kill them! Kill them!" Night shouted as though his louder voice would make his wish come true.

Shadow aimed to dash his dreams as he dropped down two yards from where Night stood. Father and son faced off with only the handful of guards to interrupt them.

"Why won't you just die?" Night growled.

"Because we have unfinished business," Shadow returned.

Night raised his hand and pointed his finger at Shadow. "Tear his throat open," he ordered his guards.

The half dozen werewolves lunged forward with their jaws opened and clawed splayed. I was finished with my followers, and picked off two of them. Quinn sprang from his side of the room and killed two others. Shadow finished off the final pair and stood facing Night like an old-fashioned gunfight.

"I don't want to kill you," Shadow told his son.

A sly smile slipped onto Night's face. "Don't worry. You won't."

Night whipped his hand behind him and pulled out a gun. I aimed my weapon and fired off two shots. One hit Night's hand and forced him to drop the gun. The other hit him between his eyes. Night's eyes widened before he slowly fell face-first into the dirt floor. A cloud of dust rose up around his form and settled over his body.

Quinn and I walked through the carnage of our own making and stopped on either side of Shadow. He stared at his son and shook his head.

"What a fool. . ." he murmured.

"Power does that to a lot of people. Believe me, I've seen it," Quinn commented.

I put a hand on his shoulder and looked into his face. "You gonna be all right?" I whispered.

A small, sad smile slipped onto his lips, but he patted my hand. "Yes, and. . .and thank you."

"For what?" I asked him.

"For dealing with a problem in a way I might have hesitated to perform, and possibly been killed," he explained.

I pocketed my gun and shrugged. "There are just some things you shouldn't have to do yourself," I told him.

He leaned down and pressed a kiss against my lips. "Thank you," he whispered.

I grinned. "What are mates for?"

Quinn stiffened and whipped his head up so he stared at the open-rafter ceiling above us. "You two can finish your kissing elsewhere. We have problems."

My ears picked up on what sounded like a herd of elephants that stampeded through the house. Shadow swept me into his arms, and we three turned to the broken metal door. A flood of

werewolves spilled out of the tunnel numbering in the dozens. Too many to handle when I didn't have much ammo left.

"Upstairs!" Quinn yelled.

We rushed over Night's stiff body and up the stairs. The stairs led into the kitchen which was situated at the rear of the house. The closest exit wasn't an option when wolves burst through the door and slipped their claws on the floor as they tried to get at us. We turned to the front and rushed across the dividing hallway to the front part of the house.

We reached the entrance hall before the shit hit the fan. The werewolf guards burst from every door, window, and hole. They blocked off the front entrance and the hallway we'd come down. Shadow set me down, but pressed himself close to me. We turned in different directions and backed up until our backs touched, and the werewolves closed in on us.

"Anybody got any bright ideas?" Quinn asked us.

I looked into their yellow, greedy eyes, and something hit me.

"I've got one," I spoke up. I took a step forward and held up my hands. "One sec! Before you kill us I've got some last words to tell you!"

The werewolves stopped their slinking towards us and tilted their heads. They glanced at one another until one of them spoke up.

"What is it?" he growled.

I turned in a slow circle and looked from one furry face to the other. "Just this. Your boss is dead."

The werewolves stiffened. The leader growled at me. "Then you'll be dead, too," the leader told me.

"You could do that, but why?" I countered. I looked them in the eye and spoke loud and clear. "It's not like any of you guys are going to get pay from a dead man, or his estate."

"Especially when his mother inherits his fortune," Shadow spoke up. He moved to stand beside me. "And if any of you know Dawn then you know she doesn't like to share, and isn't great at paying her bills." Some of the werewolves growled and others looked around the lavishly decorated rooms.

I leaned close to Shadow's ear. "Is that true?" I whispered.

"It was a constant point of contention between us," Shadow replied.

Quinn stepped forward and gestured at the walls around us.

"It's first come first serve, so you'd better get packing."

Quinn's call started a feeding frenzy for luxury items. The werewolves scattered in all directions as they sought to grab whatever valuables lay in reach. They bit and snarled at each other, and more than one performed a tug-of-war for rugs and statues. The chaos allowed us to slip between the wolves and out the front door. We sprinted down the driveway and Quinn opened the gate bars wide enough for us to step out into the freedom of the outside world.

Quinn's car stood close by, and he turned to us with a grin. "You'll get my bill in a couple of days."

"I've never looked forward to paying a bill with more pleasure," Shadow assured him.

Quinn chuckled and shook hands with Shadow, then turned to me. "You take care of yourself, Detective."

"I always do," I returned as I shook his hands.

"And if you two ever need anything, you can find me at Shadow's club," Quinn added as he walked backwards towards his car. "I figure it's the safest place now for my business."

"I'll reserve a table for you," Shadow promised.

"You do that, and I expect a couple of Bloody Mary's thrown into the mix," Quinn warned him.

Our vampire friend jumped into his car and sped off. We half-turned to the gate and the mansion beyond. Our ears picked up on the sounds of smashing windows and terrible howls. Night's dreams, and house, would soon be in ruins.

I glanced at Shadow's face. "So what do we do now?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "I have no idea."

I furrowed my brow. "You know, I could really go for a hamburger right about now," I told him.

Shadow turned to me and grinned. "I was thinking the same thing."

I looped my arms threw one of his and guided him towards the front door. "Good, because I know of this little place along the river that's got the best grub and service."

"It sounds wonderful," he commented.

"And best of all, no werewolves," I added.

Shadow chuckled. "Not even room for me?" he teased.

"I suppose I could let you take a seat beside me," I returned.

He smiled and squeezed my arm. "I'd like nothing better."

And for the first time, though not for the last, so did I. I wouldn't admit that to him for a little while longer, but love is strange that way. You never know when it'll hit you, and then suddenly you're neck-deep in it. I was neck-deep in the stuff for a long, long, long time, and with my shadow by my side the years were never long, and the adventures never boring.

Maybe being a werewolf wasn't so bad.

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